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Kristopher Allyn Jones

Eastern Illinois University

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To the Beat of a Different Drum:

Inside the Mind of an "Aspie"
(TITLE)

BY

Kristopher Allyn Jones

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts in English - Creative Writing

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

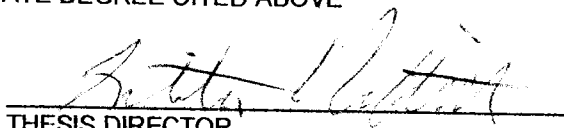
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Abstract

This thesis is a collection of the author's memoirs regarding his struggles and achievements of living with the condition of Asperger's Syndrome. The purpose of this thesis is for the material to serve as a gateway for those individuals living and coping with the condition, and, likewise, to serve as a pedantic tool for those who don't understand its esoteric aspects. By writing these memoirs, the author wishes to prevent unnecessary persecution toward those living with Asperger's Syndrome, and he wishes to emphasize to those living with the condition that it is alright to be different. This thesis serves as an awareness piece as to what Asperger's Syndrome is, as well as to help further studies and progression concerning this condition.

The thesis is divided into two parts: 1) Problems with Social Interactions, which looks into the author's problems communicating with and feeling accepted by people in society. These stories allow readers to see what is going through his head as he talks about different incidents in his life that show his struggle to fit in socially; and 2) Repetitive Behaviors and Interests, which shows the interests and repetitive behaviors the author has that makes him the unique individual he is. Once readers see the author's struggles, they will begin to understand what this condition entails and the author hopes his story will inspire others to learn more about how to treat individuals with such a condition.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my mother, Janice; my father, Warren, my sister, Amy Ferree; and my beautiful, adoring fiancée, Carissa Renee Hayden, whom I love with all my heart, for helping me complete this project. I would also like to dedicate this project to my late grandmother Evelyn Olive (Tanner) Stuebe, whose patience and love were of golden virtue in helping me get where I am today.

Acknowledgments

I would like to give special thanks to my committee members: Dr. Letitia Moffitt (chair), Dr. David Radavich, and Dr. John Martone, for their guidance in helping me complete this project. Without their guidance and support, I would not have been able to tell my stories in hopes of reaching other people with Asperger's Syndrome.

I would also like to offer this encouragement to other "Aspies:" Stay true to who you are and not let society's lack of knowledge drag you down. Be proud that you are unique and different from others, for that makes you stand out!

Voice of an Aspie

by Kris Jones

I am an Aspie
A man of my own way
Someone of my own beliefs
A voice with something to say

No one understands me
They say I am unique
Some say I am quiet
Some describe me as meek

Hard to figure out
So often the subject of shun
Passed by without glance
Not regarded as fun

Vast knowledge
Of useless fact
Conveyed with eagerness
Sometimes lacking tact

Stuck in a world
All of my own
Living in solitude
Rapt in autism's home

To the Beat of a Different Drum: Inside the Mind of an “Aspie”

“Ah so you shall be sure to be misunderstood.’ – Is it so bad to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood ...” – (*Ralph Waldo Emerson, Self-Reliance, 1841*)

Imagine an amalgamation of Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein* and Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay *Self-Reliance* and you will understand the feeling of being an individual who strives for acceptance, yet wants to remain true to himself. During this journey, this individual is most likely to go through different trials and tribulations, and, in the end, if he survives, he will become a tough human being who can face different quandaries of life while staying bona fide. This is what I hope to achieve in my life and one of the biggest obstacles I face is establishing lasting, meaningful personal relationships. This hindrance is due partially to my Asperger’s Syndrome (AS), a form of Autism Spectrum Disorder that immobilizes one’s ability to communicate effectively, and while many people view “Aspies” (a term used for people with AS) as strange or odd, I would like to reiterate that we are human beings who seek acceptance, but we are unique and this should not be cause for shame.

In *Frankenstein*, Victor’s monster seeks acceptance from a judgmental society, yet he knows he is different and he learns that it’s because of his difference that he will never be accepted; therefore, he feels alone and miserable. It is evident that he knows how others scorn him as he states:

These bleak skies I hail, for they are kinder to me than your fellow-beings. If the multitude of mankind knew of my existence, they would do as you do, and arm themselves for my destruction. Shall I not then hate them who abhor me? I will keep no terms with my enemies. I am miserable, and they shall share my wretchedness (Shelley, 74).

The monster's denial of acceptance makes him angry, yet, in the beginning, readers see the monster was created with heart. It is hard not to feel compassion for the monster as he explains to his creator:

How can I move thee? Will no entreaties cause thee to turn a favourable eye upon thy creature, who implores thy goodness and compassion? Believe me, Frankenstein: I was benevolent, my soul glowed with love and humanity: but am I not alone, miserably alone? (Shelley, 74)

Over the years, I have seen my Asperger's Syndrome become both a blessing and burden to me. As an individual, I can identify with the monster's all-too-realistic ambit of loneliness; however, this is where I would like to connect Emerson's essay into this mixture. I believe it is important for individuals to stay genuine – to know who they are, what principles and beliefs they carry, and not to be persuaded by the evils of the surrounding world, which are ideas emphasized throughout this influential essay.

In Emerson's *Self-Reliance*, he encourages people to speak up for what they believe. He tells his readers not to be conformists, and he promotes that thought is pure genius that should be expressed. He says that one should formulate his/her own notions and not be influenced by the actions or behaviors of others. He expresses this belief as he says:

What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness. It is the harder because you will always find those who think they know what is

your duty better than you know it. It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after your own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude (Emerson, 55).

Yet even Emerson recognizes that the world doesn't always understand a man of his own belief as he says, "For nonconformity the world whips you with its displeasure" (Emerson, 57). I have found these words to be very true and very inspiring to me, and I hope these words will have a profound effect on others to help realize that it is okay to be proud of who you are whether everyone accepts you or not.

The combination of seeking acceptance while remaining a nonconformist can be equally tough, especially for those who have a social impairment which causes society to view them as strange anyway. Most often, as an Aspie, I am automatically written off the page by judgmental people who don't understand this condition; therefore, I have made it my goal to educate people about this disorder. I remain optimistic that my thesis will facilitate a better understanding of Aspie behavior and help obliterate the derogatory assumption that all Aspies are strange or odd and, therefore, not able to function in society. We are different, but we are real human beings with feelings, wants, and needs who seek the aid of others to help us face life with this disorder.

In Liane Holliday Willey's book *Asperger Syndrome in the Family*, she defines the syndrome as a "high-functioning, developmental disorder comparable to autism" or a "neurobiological disorder characterized by marked deficiencies in social and communication skill" (Willey, 16). Asperger's Syndrome is among five disorders that make up the Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD). The other conditions include:

Autistic Disorder, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder (CDD), Pervasive Developmental Disorder: Not Otherwise Specified (PDD:NOS), and Rett Syndrome (Powers, 16).

Hans Asperger, an Austrian pediatrician, first described the condition in a 1944 paper in which he named the condition as “autistic psychopathy” (Schopler & Mesibov, 24). His research was part of his doctoral thesis in which he observed four young boys who shared similar traits. The boys, who seem to predominately attain AS according to Wendy Stone by a ratio of 5:1 (Stone, 7), had problems with social interaction, reciprocal communication, and a development of special interests, which are the core features of AS (Attwood, 13-14). Kathrin Hippler and Christian Klicpera state that Asperger recognized his subjects as “a group of eccentric, withdrawn, but often high gifted, individuals who manage social integration despite their somewhat odd social interaction and communication” (Hippler & Klicpera, 291). Peter Szatmari’s book *A Mind Apart: Understanding Children with Autism and Asperger Syndrome* says Asperger focused on the social impairments in autistic children, and when writing his paper, he decided to use the term “psychopathy” to contend that the children’s lack of ability to communicate socially was “attributed to their personality and should not be perceived as an illness” (Szatmari, 83).

Yet Asperger’s work was overshadowed by the study of a man named Leo Kanner who described a condition, a year earlier in 1943, known as “infantile autism” (Sigman & Capps, 3). Kanner’s study, according to Szatmari, involved 11 children who were described as “aloof with unusual communication patterns” and a preference for likeness, similar conditions to which Asperger described later (Szatmari, 11). Szatmari indicates clinicians became more cognizant of several children who possessed autistic-

like traits, but did not fit Kanner's description of autism. These children were labeled as "psychotic" or having "childhood schizophrenia" until further studies categorized this condition as being part of the PDD's (12).

Subsequently, in 1981, after Asperger's study was virtually overlooked, Lorna Wing modified his study. She observed some children with similar symptoms that Asperger studied in his group of boys, which differed from Kanner's description of "infantile autism" and she credited Asperger by naming the condition "Asperger's Syndrome" (Pyles, 66). The British doctor's paper, according to Michael Powers, brought the much needed attention to the syndrome, which it never received the first time around (Powers, 14). Wing discovered similar characteristics in her children that Asperger found in his earlier studies (Pyles 66). Clinical features, found by Wing, include:

- Lack of empathy
- Naïve, inappropriate, one-sided interaction
- Little or no ability to form friendships
- Pedantic repetitive speech
- Poor non-verbal communication
- Clumsy, ill-coordinated movements and odd postures
- Concrete (vs. abstract) thinking
- Does not adapt well to change (Attwood, 15)

It was Wing's study that made AS a part of the PDD (Szatmari, 12). Soon, thereafter, the American Psychiatric Association recognized AS as its own a diagnostic category, and in 1994 included it in the fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder* – DSM-IV (Kirby, 1). Now professionals are recognizing the

disorder, but Pyles points out that due to fragile connotation, particularly brought forth by its newness, it adds to AS' mystification and experts are still not sure where to properly categorize AS (Pyles 65-66).

Asperger's Syndrome is part of the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), which means there is a range of severity found in the individual. There are similarities in behavior between autism and AS, but they are different and it is important to note the differences. According to Szatmari, AS differs from Autism in ways of language skills. "Autism is like AS with an added impairment in language" (Szatmari, 83). Szatmari points out that Aspies can speak smoothly as children, and they often possess good grammar and vocabulary skills. However, the difference is that Aspies have problems communicating socially, and their difficulty lies within interaction with peers. Likewise, he notes that children with autism have problems communicating socially, but they also experience impediments in grammar and vocabulary unlike those with AS (82). Furthermore, he states that autistic children use "echolalic" speech, which he defines as a "simple parroting of what another person has said or what the child may have heard on television" whereas AS children's speech is more "spontaneous" (83).

Attwood sees Aspies as individuals who perceive the world differently than most everyone else. He is quoted as saying this about Aspies, "Our civilization would be extremely dull and sterile if we did not have and treasure people with Asperger's Syndrome" (Attwood, 185). Willey states most Aspies have a one-track mind, and they are often able to achieve honors such as winning the Pulitzer Prize Award because of their tenacity – even though they most generally overwhelm people with their obsessed knowledge of certain topics (Willey 17-18), which Nancy Wiseman points out can last

from several months to several years (Wiseman, 130). Stone points out that Aspies have a hard time “understanding perspectives of others,” and they often don’t understand “the art of listening” (Stone, 8). Willey characterizes Aspies as insensitive to social rules, but acknowledges them as having a high moral code. They are “rule followers and rule enforcers” (Willey, 29). Mitzi Waltz, who wrote the book *Autistic Spectrum Disorders: Understanding the Diagnosis and Getting Help*, says Aspies have a tendency to be successful in careers, especially when contact with other people is limited and they are practicing something of particular interest (Waltz, 22).

In 2005, I was diagnosed by Dr. Thomas Herrman as having a mild case of AS. Ever since then, I have become fascinated with its history and existence as part of the Autism Spectrum Disorder. Though I was just recently diagnosed, I know I have lived my whole life as an Aspie, and I have just become fortunate enough to have received a proper diagnosis in this current stage of my life. Even as a young child, I displayed characteristics that screamed Aspie, and I had no clue as to what this condition entailed. This thesis will examine my behaviors as an Aspie in a pragmatic way as to serve as a gateway for those individuals living and coping with the condition, and, likewise, to become a pedantic tool for those who don’t understand its esoteric aspects.

Quite often, I am told by people that it is amazing that I have made it as far in school as I have, and that I have traveled all over the world considering I have AS. Even in the DSM-IV-TR introduction of AS, it is stated that young Aspies have little interest in making friendships while adult Aspies desire friendships but have problems understanding “the conventions of social interactions” (DSM-IV-TR, First, 80), which is an altogether too realistic portrayal of my own life as I hope to convey in my writings.

Yet I don't see this life-long condition as a disability. Instead, I choose to see it as a blessing that makes me a very unique person – even though at times, I can be persecuted for being different or appear antisocial to others. I suppose it's easy for people to write me off as strange and disregard me, but I hope my writings will give other Aspies a voice that will evoke greater understanding from a judgmental society. And for those who do not have AS, I hope that my writing will prevent unnecessary persecution and emphasize that it is okay to be different.

My goal was to write an autobiographical work of events in my life that mirrors characteristics displayed by Aspies. Through an anthology of memoirs, I wish to record my accounts of living with such a condition to help others understand and tolerate the condition.

My thesis was modeled from Donna Williams' book, "*Nobody, Nowhere*," a courageous, warm, inviting account of her life as she deals with Autism. What I most admire about this novel is her courage to share her stories with others and help others acquire a better understanding of this condition. I feel her book has helped make an important impact on the study of Autism because it allows readers to see the struggles she endured with the condition and gives readers an improved awareness of what living with Autism is like. Williams shows how she is able to join in the real world while also staying in her own "autistic" world, and I found her stories captivating. I would like to tell my story in short, episodic essays that illuminate my character the way Williams wrote *Nobody, Nowhere*, as I see this style more fitting to explain my character.

My stories include themes such as awkwardness in social skills and strange topics of interest I have developed over the years, including a fascination with baseball, 80's

music, soap operas, world coins, world travel, geography, ethnic foods, and Arab culture. All the while, it will tell of my evolving personality and who I am, but, most important, it will emphasize the fact that I am proud to be different and that my condition sets me apart from most people.

I wish to take certain phases of my life and weave them into a narrative explaining my struggles and achievements of living with this condition. I also wrote this thesis to make AS a little more publicly known. My works show thoughts, feelings, and past experiences of how I have dealt with things in my life as an Aspie. Still a fairly new condition, there is still much to be discovered, such as its origins and classification, but through current modular identification detailed chronicles of my life, I wish to convey what is known of this condition to the public as an awareness piece to help further studies and progression. I wish to explore the realms of Asperger's Syndrome as a fairly new and defined condition, and I also hope to express greater awareness and sympathy for those who live with the condition.

Diagnostic Criteria for 299.80 Asperger's Disorder (Table 1)

- A. Qualitative impairment in social interaction, as manifested by at least two of the following:
 - 1. marked impairments in the use of multiple nonverbal behaviors such as eye-to-eye gaze, facial expression, body postures, and gestures to regulate social interaction
 - 2. failure to develop peer relationships appropriate to developmental level
 - 3. a lack of spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment, interests, or achievements with other people (e.g. by a lack of showing, bringing, or pointing out objects of interest to other people)
 - 4. lack of social or emotional reciprocity
- B. Restricted repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, and activities, as manifested by at least one of the following:
 - 1. encompassing preoccupation with one or more stereotyped and restricted patterns of interest that is abnormal in intensity or focus
 - 2. apparently inflexible adherence to specific, nonfunctional routines or rituals
 - 3. stereotyped and repetitive motor mannerisms (e.g., hand or finger flapping or twisting, or complex whole-body movements)
 - 4. persistent preoccupation with parts of objects
- C. The disturbance causes clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning
- D. There is no clinically significant general delay in language (e.g., single words used by age 2 years, communicative phrases used by age 3 years)
- E. There is no clinically significant delay in cognitive development or in the development of age-appropriate self-help skills, adaptive behavior (other than social interaction), and curiosity about the environment in childhood
- F. Criteria are not met for another specific Pervasive Developmental Disorder or Schizophrenia

*(Information borrowed from *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition Text Revision*, p. 84).

Part 1: Problems with Social Interactions

Chapter 1: Table For One, Please

In the Fall 2005 semester of grad school, I decided to treat myself to a nice dinner at Cody's – a nearby restaurant in Mattoon – for successfully making it through my first semester as a graduate student in the English department at Eastern Illinois University.

"A table for one," I told the hostess as she led me to a booth where I sat in solitude. As I ordered my drink and appetizer, I noticed a big crowd come in. They took up at least five tables and a booth. I think they were all undergraduate students who lived in a dorm; freshmen maybe?

I looked around and saw they were having a ball. I was happy for them, yet saddened for myself; almost to the point where I faltered and caved to tears. Not one of them knew what it was like to be me in that moment of time because they all had their friends there with them. Would I have it any different? Of course not. No one should feel outcast; such an atrocity should not be wished upon anyone.

Yet, time and time again, I sit in solitude, outcast from society. What is wrong with me? I am not angry or spiteful like the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, but I hurt like any normal human being would. I am lost, lonely, and I have little to no social skills to help my cause.

My purpose in writing this piece is not for anyone to feel sorry for me. I am immune to any unwanted gestures of sympathy. Yet my purpose is to encourage people to reach out to others who may feel lost and lonely too, as sometimes the feeling is too much to bear.

Chapter 2: Look At Me!

Every Christmas, I enjoy going to my aunt's house for dinner. She usually has turkey or ham, with mashed potatoes, stuffing, and dinner rolls – almost comparable to what my Thanksgiving plate would consist of since I am a picky eater.

I really enjoy being around my family too. I love seeing all of my cousins; however, sometimes, I do feel lost in the mix. I came from a family of all girls, who eventually grew, married, and had kids of their own, including boys. But for a while, being the only boy had its toll.

As a child, I remember my cousins getting a lot of attention – primarily because they were older and their lives consisted of more complex issues. This is not to say I was ignored, but it was much more interesting to talk about who was going to the high school dance than it was to discuss the picture of Santa Claus I drew at Christmas.

How I wished to be older because I thought that would help my situation, yet I still enjoyed being a kid too. Who wouldn't when there were gifts to open under a tree?

I love all my cousins the same, and I have always been interested in what was going on in their lives, but, sometimes, an invidious feeling inhabits me. So, while my family often sits around reminiscing about the past, I jump in and say, "I got an A on my English paper in school." This is inappropriate one-sided conversation as it was out of sync with what the rest of the family was talking about. But I wanted them to hear about me. Nine times out of ten, I get baffled looks from everyone.

Growing up and feeling isolated from your family because of your gender is tough. I vied for my family's attention, and I wasn't always as successful as I would like to have been. Still, I was loved.

Chapter 3: The Lonely Lunch Room

Another day of high school, I was feeling good. I was giving solid, bright answers in Spanish class while gathering up participation points and maintaining my light-hearted “class-clown” reputation, laughing and learning in psychology, and trying to stay awake in all my other classes while learning a thing or two. I felt confident that I’d make it through this four-year prison term – on my senior year. I was starting to see the bright light at the end of a very stressful, strenuous stretch as a student. Beyond the depths of this daydream, reality ensued with the sharp, piercing sound of a bell indicating it was time for lunch.

My school split three lunch hours to limit the number of people down in the cafeteria, since I came from a rather large school. We had Lunch Period A, B, and C. This was beneficial to save space, but it made it difficult for students to pick out which peers to sit with since other friends had lunch at different times of the day.

Downstairs, in the lunchroom, I saw faceless expressions of different individuals sitting at different tables. I looked around the huge, student-filled room where tables seemed to be endless, and I often wondered to myself, “Is today the day I will find someone to sit with or will I eat alone?” For my character is hard to describe. I was known by many, yet I had very little to no friends, and I didn’t belong to any one certain group.

There were the preps, the jocks, the geeks, different ethnic groups, the poor, the rich, the goofy, and the serious, and I didn’t claim any of these groups as my own. Sure, I

knew most of them, but my shy, backward manner thwarted me from asking to sit at their table.

A feeling of loneliness started to creep inside. I looked in all four different directions. Finally, a group of people whom I have known since I was a kid were sitting at a table, and I went over to join them. I wasn't to sure they wanted me to sit with them, but I did anyway, and I was happy to have found someone for the day. I laughed at all their jokes, but, in the meantime, I couldn't help wondering if I was really wanted or if they just took pity on me. This was the harsh, hard reality of the lunchroom, day after day.

Chapter 4: Hey, It's Shorty K!

I was never really good at socializing. During my senior year of high school, I played basketball for my church. I knew most of the guys who were on the team since they went to church with me, but I never really considered them as my friends. Instead, I found them cliquish since they went to Lutheran School together, and I went to public school.

I tried to fit in. I played cards with them, talked to them in the hallways at school, and practiced with them two or three times a week. Yet when it came time to travel for games, I often took my headphones and walkman to avoid any socialization. Also, I took a notebook to write stories or poems, as I often do. I am sure they thought I was strange.

Before games, my teammates would shoot the breeze down on the floor, but since I was the worst player on the team and I wasn't very social, I was often found hiding away in the upper part of the bleachers – away from everyone until it was time for the game to begin.

"Yeah, there's 'Shorty K' up in the bleachers again. Man, he is one strange kid," I imagined hearing one of them say as they shot looks at me down from the ground. I was just hoping that once they would reach out and extend an inviting hand so as to include me as part of the group.

Mostly, I warmed the bench as I saw very little playing time. However, I do recall a game in which I made a basket, and I got respect from my teammates that day. They smiled, gave me high-fives, and talked about what a great shot I made until it made me

feel good about myself – like I had something to contribute to the team. However, most of the time, I would digress into my typical disagreeable behavior.

It took time and patience – by my teammates – but eventually they came to understand me more than I realized, and they respected me. I came to socialize with them more often at school once the season was over, and they even said that I came out of my shell. It was an amazing feat for both me and my teammates!

Chapter 5: Can I Play Too?

It was summer time. The sun was shining fiercely and beaming down on the fields of grass where most boys my age – at the age of 14 – were outside playing baseball or football. I could see them play at the Tilton School from my bedroom window. Tilton School was only one house away from where I lived and its long grass field was just across the back alley.

However, I was more consumed by staying in my room and playing my old Nintendo. Often, I would play games like *Friday the 13th* or *Tecmo Superbowl* just to pass time.

True, I could have gone outside and joined my neighborhood acquaintances in their games, but I convinced myself that I wasn't wanted to join in their games – a psychological conundrum I dreamed up wistfully inside my head. I would only participate if they came to my house to invite me.

Still, as I watched them play games through the window of my room or the back door of my house, I stood flabbergasted as to why I was still cooped up in the house. How I wished I could be part of the fun to, and I usually ended up crying to my parents, "They don't like me." My parents would respond by telling me, "Just go outside and join the game."

I was never really good at sports, so perhaps this was the reason they didn't come and invite me as often as I would have liked (For it would be false to say that they never invited me). Fostering a bruised pride, I eventually sucked it in and lurked around the rock-filled alley until one of them spotted me. By this time, I was usually asked to fill in

as a substitute for someone who had to go home. Still, it was good to be included, even if I was an "easy out" or was most likely to drop a pass.

Chapter 6: I Ain't Got Nobody!

If Phil Collins and The Supreme's lyrics of "You Can't Hurry Love" has any significance, then no one knows it better than I. "You can't hurry love. No you just have to wait."

I remember being in eighth grade and falling for a girl whom I had a crush on ever since my days of kindergarten. I remember going to the town's roller skating rink for a school outing and requesting a song for them to play for her. It was a special request. However, I really messed up when I asked the dee-jay to play Richard Marx's song "Right Here Waiting for You" on the speakers and learned, at that moment, that she was going out with him. Imagine the humiliation I felt. Luckily, the kid was my friend and he didn't harbor hard feelings, but the feelings of rejection were too much to bear. Yet it was something I would have to learn to live with because this wasn't the first time or the last that I would be rejected by a girl.

Then, I remember first falling head over heels for a girl in high school. She was dating someone at the time, but she had a small attraction to me too. During my senior year, she was having problems with her boyfriend and prom was coming up. How I wanted to ask her, but I was really shy. I didn't want to become a third wheel until I knew for sure they were done, so I asked another girl friend of mine. We went to prom together, but shortly after I asked my friend, I got a note from her saying she would have gone with me. Unfortunately, it was too late, as I was not the kind of guy to stand someone up for the sake of going to the dance with someone else. After all, I do not have the gall to say, "Something suddenly came up," the way Marsha Brady told her friend

Charley after Doug Simpson asked her to the dance on an episode of the *Brady Bunch*. However, I could tell she liked me. I used to come and watch her play softball, and she used to flash smiles at me back and forth when I sat in her class during high school as an independent project. I guess the time was never right as she and I grew apart, and I have never seen or heard from her since.

I do remember one year going to my sister's sixteenth birthday party she had at my aunt and uncle's country music dance hall. I was the deejay for that party, and I played a great variety of my music from the '80s and '90s. The guys and girls had fun dancing and talking. My mom told me to ask one of the girls to dance, so I chose a girl to ask. "Will you dance with me," I asked in eager anticipation hoping she would say yes. It wasn't like I loved this girl. I just thought she was attractive enough to dance with, and she looked me square in the eye and said, "I don't think so, but thanks." I sulked back to the deejay booth, and when I told my aunt and mother what happened, I remember my aunt saying, "Poor Kris, he doesn't have very much luck with the girls." Perhaps my aunt was right, but it didn't keep me from trying.

The next run-in I had with feelings came in junior college when I met an attractive girl who used to work at the library. I fell in love with her, and she was the first love of my life. I remember asking her out to a movie, and she responded, "I am not interested in dating anyone right now." I was crushed, but very smitten. I was not going to give up. I was determined to get her to notice me. Through time, I got her to open up and become my friend. Soon, she felt comfortable going out with me from time to time. Things were going right, but she still wasn't able to commit to a romantic relationship. For four years, I beat myself up over this girl. I said, "If I am not good enough for her,

then I am not good enough for anyone.” How foolish, but these feelings seemed real to me at the time. For four years, I locked myself away from the world and denied myself from having any fun. I remember getting a letter from her shortly after I moved to New Hampshire, and in the letter it explained that she couldn’t commit because she was a lesbian. How crushed I was. How I wasted so much time that I couldn’t get back. It wasn’t her fault, as I can only imagine what she was going through, but the rejection I felt and the heartbreak was enough to keep me away from pursuing a relationship for quite a while.

In college, there was a girl who went to my church. I liked her, but she was already dating one of the guys at the church. She was very attractive and she was on the college swimming team, but she was involved with this guy until they broke up. I didn’t want to rush in right away, but when I did ask, she responded that she was already seeing someone else and that we were good friends. If only I had a nickel for every time I heard the good friends’ speech. Needless to say, it wasn’t doing anything for my pride, ego, or self-esteem.

Unlucky in love, I decided to try a different region in the United States. I moved to Meredith, New Hampshire where I became the town’s newspaper reporter. Immediately, I started to establish positive relationships within the community, but I was still lacking a romantic relationship. I chose to set up a bank account in Meredith, and that’s where I met this blonde girl who used to flash me smiles every time I came through the drive-thru. She made me feel good every time I saw her, and I thought she was single. So, one day, I got enough nerve to ask her out. I went into the bank to do some unnecessary bank business, and I asked her co-worker if she was seeing anyone.

“She has a boyfriend, and she has a daughter,” she responded.

Steeerike three, y’er out! So, I slunk away and decided that maybe moving clear across the United States where I had no friends or possible chance of finding romance was a mistake.

So, I moved back home to Danville. Then, I started working at the University of Illinois where I was surrounded by good-looking women. But to no avail, nothing ever worked. I grew in despair over my solitude and decided to focus on traveling to take away from the pain. So, I even tried to find love in Europe. I remember taking a cruise around the canals of Amsterdam. While we were on the boat, I remember a pretty blonde Dutch girl who was serving drinks. I got all liquored up and eventually gave her my email address and hoped she would write me when I got back to the States.

Unfortunately, this was not the case, but the excitement of the trip lingered on, and I decided this was how I was going to spend my single life. I was going to travel. I made plans to go to Oman, Libya, and Qatar, and possibly entertained the idea of settling down with a nice Arab girl for the rest of my life – even if that meant leaving the United States.

However, I did not have the monetary funds to travel to all these places right away, so I had to come back home and work for a while. Then, I came back home and grew very bored with my job. You never know where life will take you next, and I had no idea. I just knew that I didn’t want to work at the University anymore. So, I walked away from my job and took my chance at graduate school.

By the time I got to grad school, I was almost thirty. As much fun as I had traveling, secretly I still wished to have the company of a female companion. I mean what was wrong with me? I wasn’t like some of those other jerks out there that women

run to all the time. However, it seemed hopeless as a string of rejections continued, including one whose let-down line read, "Thanks for the inquiry, but I am not interested in dating anyone right now." By this time, I felt somewhat suicidal, I figured if no one wanted to share their life with me, then my life wasn't worth living. Pretty flimsy thinking, but I just didn't have the will to carry on by myself.

Strings of rejections left me in a world of hurt. During the Christmas season of 2005, I decided to ask one of my karaoke friends from home to dinner. She had been my friend for a long time and it seemed like she had been flirting with me since she had broken up with her boyfriend. So, I bought her a couple Christmas gifts and gave them to her at the place she worked since I had not seen her for a while, and I asked her out.

"Sure, we can get together sometime after Christmas," she said, and I was elated.

Was this not a rejection? I got my hopes up high with possibilities, but a week later, on New Year's Eve, one of her other friends at karaoke came up to me and said "She doesn't want to go out with you." This hurt tremendously because not only could she not tell me herself, she didn't even act like our friendship was worth saving. I was full of despair, but I still would not quit.

Soon, the next semester started, and I enrolled in a poetry class. I started talking to a girl that was in my nonfiction class the semester before, and I started thinking to myself, "This is a nice girl, maybe I should ask her out." So, I wrote her a poem and asked her out. Her first response was, "Thank you, but I would just rather be friends." Soon, thereafter, we started having lunch regularly and we got to know each other better. Then, she changed her mind, and we started dating. We have been dating for over a year now, and we are engaged to be married in 2008. I finally got what I wanted –

companionship. Now she and I have an amazing relationship in which we both have fun together and enjoy each other's company.

So, what does this have to do with Asperger's Syndrome? Well, I learned that I shouldn't always assume a girl likes me just because she smiles. Aspies have a hard time learning body language and communicating. I thought that just because a girl smiled meant that she was attracted to me. This set up false hopes that led to heartbreak when rejection entered the picture. Today, I am very happy with my fiancée; however, back then, my eagerness led to much heartache, disappointment, and low self-esteem. True, it is hard to read people and their body language, but what doesn't kill you makes you tougher. Sometimes, I feel as though I have been jaded because of some of this letdown, but I am a tough guy, and I will rebound and live life the way I want with the company of my future wife by my side.

Chapter 7: The Old College Try

I remember my first week of graduate school at Eastern Illinois University. Here I was a man of my late twenties going back to school after completing my Bachelor's degree in 1998; only there was seven years hiatus from the time I was last there.

How everything had changed at the university. The union was redone and now contained many more restaurants in it than the days in which it only featured a McDonald's. Even the library had changed since I was last there, and the campus was in the process of adding more improvements.

So much had changed in Charleston too. Video stores were shut down to the one Family Video that stands on the main road in Charleston. Pawn shops were closed down. I remember one on the square that I visited frequently when collecting tapes. New restaurants had opened up, and I felt it was centuries ago since I was last there.

Classes seemed to go pretty easy during that first week, although I did something that I should not have done in signing up for at least 17 hours worth of classes. At Eastern, nine hours is considered a full-time normal load for grad students, and it should not exceed 12.

"Don't you think you'll get burned out?" my advisor asked me after consenting to allow me to sign up for such a heavy load.

"No, I will be fine," I answered remembering the days of when I took 18 hours per semester to finish up my Bachelors degree. Yet I wasn't fine. That semester I didn't get much sleep, I didn't eat very well, and I wasn't taking my depression medication and this is what happened as a result:

I remember attending my first graduate seminar, English 5000 (Introduction to Methods and Issues in English Studies). It was a class in which we learned how to research materials we needed in order to be successful at graduate school. The professor of the class was very nice, and I was a bit nervous to meet my fellow graduate colleagues, although I met a couple of them in other classes already that semester. I remember walking in and taking my seat in the seminar room; the tables were set in a square with the professor facing center. I liked sitting close to the professor so I could hear what he was saying. I looked around the room and saw a bunch of graduate assistants.

At the English Department of EIU, English graduate assistants help the department out with departmental chores, and they can teach remedial composition to undergrad students. However, assistantships were limited in number and the applicant had to maintain certain credentials to obtain the position, which I am sure consisted of past Grade Point Average, test scores on the Graduate Record Examination, and letters of recommendation from past teachers or employers. It's not a job I really wanted, but it would have been nice to mingle with some of my colleagues this way as they work closely together at the department's writing center.

Yet, in class, I could tell this was a special group of students. They were very smart, and they were very educated in the field of English and literature. In fact, they were rather intimidating. It's like they knew every piece of literature that ever existed, and they always had intelligent answers to give that made me feel quite inferior. Quite frankly, I was a journalism and speech communications major before, in undergrad, with an emphasis on public relations, and this time I was going to school to be a creative writing major within the English department. All of these literature cohorts were creeping

me out with their vast knowledge of literature such as Bram Stoker's "*Dracula*," Virginia Woolf's "*Mrs. Dalloway*," or even Jane Austen novels. I was not familiar with these books, and I was starting to wonder if going to graduate school was the right thing to do.

Then, one day, we had presentations to give of a paper we worked on, and I remember asking one of the students if he used a medical dictionary as part of his research. This kid was exceptionally bright and pretty much a know-it-all who wasn't afraid to show off his pride.

"No," he said condescendingly and sarcastically. He made me feel really stupid, and at that moment I wanted to quit graduate school. Granted, he did apologize to me the next day and told me he was out of line, but at that moment, I knew grad school wouldn't be as easy as I hoped it would be.

So, I went to my advisor and told him maybe graduate school isn't for me. Apparently, I wasn't smart enough to compete in the English department next to such an elite group of students, I thought. Being around those students made me feel dumb and out of place.

"Well, grad school isn't for some people," he told me, and it was left at that. It was my choice. After crying to my parents to let me come back home and hang up the charade, they told me to stick it out.

"We know you can do it, Kris. You will be the first in our family to get through grad school. We have faith in you. Don't let them run you away."

They were right. I shouldn't let them run me away. I was good enough to be in graduate school, and it was what God wanted me to do. So I was going to stay, and I did, but it wasn't easy.

How I wanted to drop the class and take it at a later time without these students being present, but I knew I could be tough and stick it out. It's peculiar because there were times when I felt I was emotionally raped, and I felt there were times that these students unnecessarily brown-nosed the professor, which is a behavior that I do not find appealing in anyone.

I didn't dislike these students. One-on-one they seemed like very nice people, but there was just something about them as a group. They seemed to be arrogant, ruthless, and self-centered. However, this was my perception. Being an Aspie, it is hard to read people or tell whether some people have ulterior motives. One thing is for sure, this group of students seemed to have confidence in their knowledge and abilities, which is something I lacked.

Yet it's funny because personally I don't really know any of these students or their backgrounds that well, but I decided to shun them anyway. I shut myself out of their world because of my perception. Whether it was accurate or faulty, it was real to me. As I come closer to completing my degree, I wish it hadn't been this way. Often, I wonder if my perception or lack of an ability to read people cost me some dear friendships; however, I stuck with what I felt was right; deep down wishing them the best.

So, I didn't get to hang out with them on weekends or weeknights and shoot the bull, but I did what I felt was necessary, and it helped me gain enough momentum to get through the program my own way not feeling as though I cheated myself or my character's dignity in any way other than making future connections?

Chapter 8: Stuebe Wonder

I loved my grandmother very much. More than she ever realized, and I wish I could have expressed that to her in her final days on Earth. However, one day, when or if I get to Heaven, I will express my gratitude, love, and sorrow for all things I have done wrong to her.

My grandma Evelyn (Tanner) Stuebe stood about 5'4", 140 pounds, and she was very scrawny. She wore glasses and had short gray hair. She was very busy with things she enjoyed to do which included playing the organ, playing solitaire, or working puzzles. Her typical nights would consist of eating dinner, sitting in her favorite recliner to watch the WCIA Channel 3 News at both six and ten o'clock, watching the Quality Value Channel (QVC) for deals, playing solitaire, crocheting afghans for her grandchildren, or reading the Bible to relax. Throughout the day, she worked as a hairdresser styling older women's hair.

She was very outspoken. I remember coming to visit her one afternoon in between classes at Danville Area Community College. I turned on the television and started watching *Days of Our Lives*. She had just finished doing a lady's hair, and she came out to the living room to join me. She took her seat in her recliner and started watching the soap. About five or six minutes later of observing the characters that were on the show that day, Grandma asked, "Kristopher, why do you watch such stupid nonsense?" I didn't know how to respond because deep down I knew she was right. My answer, "'Cause I just like it," I said as I sat trying to refrain myself from laughing at her bluntness.

Grandma was very rigid in her ways, and she found things about all of us which she felt was a little eccentric and to her dismay. But what made her so funny and special was her ability to speak her mind.

"Kristopher, why do you need another record? Don't you have enough?" she would ask after I added another one to my collection. She would follow that line up with, "Why do you spend money so frivolously?"

Grandma Stuebe was my phone buddy, and I loved speaking to her on the phone. If I ever had a problem, I could always call grandma and talk about it. If someone was picking on me in school, I could call grandma. If I had a fight with my parents or sister, I could call grandma. If I missed the school bus, which seemed to be quite frequent, almost ritualistic, I could call grandma, and she would always be there to pick me up.

Grandma was my rock, my comfort, my crutch that I inadvertently took advantage of when I was feeling sad or even worse yet, depressed. I am sure my sob stories were agonizing for her to listen to. After all, does anyone want to be surrounded by people living with or in constant misery? But she was always there for me. She accepted me for who I was and how I felt. She worked with me to overcome feelings such as hurt, anger, rejection, and disappointment, and she helped mold me into a more wise and confident individual over the years. Yet I should have been strong enough to show her this stage in my life when she was still around.

I often wonder if she would be proud of me today? I suppose some things I have done would make her proud of me, and some things I have done would not. That's all hearsay now, but I wonder if she would have come to understand me and my ways as an

Aspie. For when she died, she did not know that I was diagnosed with such a condition; this condition which has been embedded as part of my personality forever.

Much of my grandmother's frustration with me involved the fact that I was immature. However, she was not aware that I did not understand how to socialize around other people and that I had to vie for people's affection even if it meant I blurted out something inappropriate at the dinner table.

Another frustrating behavior I had in the presence of my grandmother was that I took up all of her time during her visits. I commanded her attention, and she paid far more attention to me than my sister or even my parents. My conversations with her were one-sided rather than reciprocal, which is very common in individuals with Asperger's. Instead of "Marsha, Marsha, Marsha" – in reference to the *Brady Bunch* – it was Kris, Kris, Kris. "I feel pretty depressed today, Grandma," "Grandma, I need to talk to someone," or even "Grandma, how come God hates me so much?" I can only imagine the frustration my grandmother felt when she was around me.

And I was very selfish too. I hardly ever asked, "How are you?" or "Do you want to talk about anything?" It was all about me, and after she passed away, I felt like I didn't know her at all. I knew very little of her past as a little girl and her background, which is something she hardly ever discussed, according to my mother. However, she got an earful of situations I was going through. She knew me better than I knew her.

In March of 1999, my grandmother passed away from heart failure. It was a very sad time for me. I remember being in her hospital room the night before. She was hooked up to breathing machines, and she gave me this look. I tried to stay strong for her, but it was as if she knew her time had come, and I could not keep back my tears. I lost it. I tried

to stay strong, but streams of tears fell from my face in sorrow and shame. What could I utter than a mere, "I am sorry" to her, and she looked me in the eye, took hold of my hand, and squeezed it with all the strength she could muster. It was heart-wrenching to know that this was my last interaction with grandma.

Losing grandma was surreal to me. Even after her funeral, I had the strongest desire to call her home phone number. I also used to drive by her house, and I could even envision her standing by the kitchen sink looking out the window and waving goodbye to me the way she used to do. I felt as though I lost a dear, close friend, and I would feel that pain for a long time.

Today, I have to live with the grief of how I was with grandma. This was the same woman who talked me out of some of my most troubling moments. It's ironic how she knew me, and I never knew her as much as I should. I promised myself that when or if I get to Heaven, I will be there to greet grandma with open arms and a big stream of tears with a heartfelt, "Thank you" and "I am sorry."

Chapter 9: The Wallflower

Going to parties were never my scene, especially when I was in high school. I rarely got invited, but when I did, I am sure I made my presence known. How I wish I could report it was by acting as life of the party. Instead, I was the wallflower who just stayed off in the corner hoping to be spotted or talked to by someone.

I remember going to one party on my senior year. It was at one of my classmate's house, and he was going to have a variety of kids there that I knew and some in which I didn't know. I was almost positive there would be ones that I didn't much care for either, as that is usually what happens at a party.

DING-DONG! I rang the doorbell, and there was my friend to greet me. He said, "Everybody's downstairs."

Everybody? Who is everybody? I don't have very many close friends and this guy is talking to me as if I really fit into any one group. This was too foreign to me, as I have always done well with people on an individual basis, but never that well in groups. I don't know maybe tonight will be different.

I smiled and immediately went downstairs. Usually, I am among the first of the guests to arrive. With small groups, I usually do okay, but as the groups get larger, I start to falter.

"Hey, it's Shorty K!" they shouted to make me feel included. This was nothing surprising to me. Everyone called me Shorty K. After all, it was my high school nickname.

"What's up, Shorty?" they asked sitting around in a small group. By this time, most of the guests who were there were people I recognized from school. So, I felt comfortable.

"Oh, nothing really," I said meekly. "I'm just trying to hang in and get through high school. I might go up to Maine this summer, although I really wanted to go to Boston."

Everyone flashed me a smile as I was sitting there wondering to myself "*Did I say the right thing? Should I say something else? What should I do with my coat? Take it off or leave it on in case of an early emergency exit?*"

So, I gathered around and listened to everyone talk about themselves or friends of theirs with whom I was not acquainted. The social charade was getting to me within a matter of minutes, and this was just the beginning of what I expected to be a very long night. *Why didn't I just make up an excuse as to why I couldn't come to this party?*

Sure enough, as time went by, more and more people whom I did not know started showing up. The crowd accumulated in great number, and soon I was starting to feel left out of the mix. Everyone was mingling and having a good time. I just stood in the corner and watched everyone laughing, smiling, and talking about whatever so desired them.

There I stood trying to pretend like I was having a super groovy time when all the while I wish I wore a watch to see how many more stinking minutes I had to go before I would come up with a flimsy excuse to leave.

The guy who hosted the party was pretty cool. He was really smart, and he had a good number of friends. And I liked most of the people he hung out with, but just never

thought of them as my exclusive group. It wasn't like I hung out with these people much. I never went to the movies with them or shot pool with them or even hung out with them anywhere outside of school, until this night.

He was pretty wealthy, and he had a huge house in the rich section of town. His parties were always held in his basement which was huge. He had a strobe light and a dry ice machine for effects. He also played cool music like Firehouse's "Love of a Lifetime" or Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit," and there was no alcohol on the premise since none of us were old enough to drink.

As soon as more people showed, I started to get all nervous. I believe I sat back in the corner and shook of nerves. *What if one of them asks me about me? I am not interesting. No one likes me. I shouldn't have come to this stupid party.*

Soon, people were starting to check me out, and I flashed them a half-hearted, smug smile to show that I wasn't that bad of a person. They smiled back, and, occasionally, one of my friends would come around and ask me if I was having a good time. *No really, can't you tell?*

"Sure," I uttered in fallacy.

Sometimes, I caught them glancing at me. Even the ones I know. Then, they would laugh, and it would make me feel funny. *Are they making fun of me?* All of a sudden, I started thinking about that scene in *Carrie* where Carrie's mother told her, "They're all going to laugh at you." Then, in a twisted dimension of panic and fear, I felt as though they were all laughing at me. I started imagining fictitious conversations taking place between them that went something along these lines:

"Hey, who is that goofy kid in the corner over there? He hasn't said anything all night. Who invited him?"

Then, the kid who hosted the party would say, ***"Oh, he's just some goofball I invited because I felt sorry for him. He's a dork. Maybe he'll leave soon."***

Some laughed impetuously as I stood over in the corner twiddling my thumbs and occasionally taking a sip of the Coke I poured myself earlier while others gave me this sympathetic "Hey loser" type look that made me want to start bawling. Oh, the fright of this surreal picture, and it would be like this on and off whenever I went to a social gathering.

Then, all of a sudden, I was snapped back into reality as a person whom I never seen in my life was standing next to me saying, "Hey what's up?"

My initial thought response echoed David Spade in this *Saturday Night Live* skit in which he worked as a secretary for NBC, *"And you are?"* I don't remember much about this person other than the fact that I just wanted them to go away. *Go away! Leave me alone. I don't want to talk.*

I am sure that I dominated the conversation by talking about one of my many eccentric dreams I had for my future. So, I envisioned this person walking over to another of my high school friends and saying, ***"What a spaz. That kid isn't cool. He just kept going on about all these future vacations he hopes to take and what colleges he hopes to go to."***

Whenever I talk to strangers, I have a tendency to go on bragging about things I have done in the past, present, or what I hope to do in the future. I am sure the people

who have tried talking to me are in a big rush to run away from me and avoid all contact thereafter.

How I wanted to cry. I wished I could have taken after Arthur Fonzarelli on *Happy Days* or Zach Morris on *Saved by the Bell* in the art of being cool. But I was a social disaster.

Whenever I did join in group conversations, they were talking about people I did not know or care anything about, so it was hard to get enthused. *How much longer will this go on? I want to go home and just go to bed. I wish people wouldn't try so hard to befriend me.*

Or was it the opposite? Were my confused, lost, and meek looks along with my awkward social skills a cry for help for people to meet me half way? How I wish someone cool would take me under their wings and make me their project. Just like one of those teen movies where the cool kids take on a bet to make a geeky, awkward kid really popular and liked by his peers. This kind of stuff just doesn't happen in the real world. Or does it?

Painstakingly humiliated by my antisocial behavior and awkward social skills, I finally decided I had enough. I didn't have a panic attack, but I quietly got my coat and thanked the kid who had the party for inviting me. Then, I made up some pathetic lie to excuse me for leaving early. I am sure he could see through it.

After the party, I got in my car and chilled out to some of my favorite music. I was silent all the way home. However, the minute I walked through the door at home, I cried to my mother that no one liked me, and she would always ask me, "Did you try to socialize?" I always told her I tried – even if my efforts were minimal or dismal for that

matter. I asked her if I mattered to anyone, and she did her best to assure me that I did.

Then, I calmed down and fell asleep making the present party a thing of the past.

Now, when I am invited to a party, one thing is almost always guaranteed. If you see a shy, meek Aspie hanging out in the corner waiting for the moment in which he gets to leave and always regretting his behavior while at the party, chances are "Shorty K" has been in the house.

Chapter 10: I Wanna Go Home

It was supposed to be the trip of a lifetime; a chance for me to study literature in another country, meet new people, and see exciting things.

“It’ll change your life,” one professor said to me when he found out I was part of the group planning to go study in Grantham, England’s Harlaxton Manor.

My chance to study abroad came from Eastern Illinois University’s English Department’s provocation of students to visit “Literary Landscapes.” The five-week program was designed to allow both graduate and undergraduate students to study abroad and earn up to six hours of credit while getting to see historical landmarks.

I was super-hyped up for this chance to go across the ocean again and see such landscapes, and I thought the possibility of meeting new people who were also English majors would land me a friend or two. I had my hopes set high at the possibilities.

We visited the moors, which inspired Emily Bronte’s book *Wuthering Heights*; a manor house in which the movie version of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* was filmed; two of William Wordsworth’s former houses including Dove Cottage, which was located in England’s beautiful Lake District; and even went to London where we saw a Shakespeare play *Antony and Cleopatra* at the Globe Theatre.

Honestly, I never was much inspired by literature, but I thought I would take this trip as a second trip to Europe and a chance to see things I didn’t get to see the first time I went in 2003. And I was looking at it as a way to get credits for school, travel to other countries, and make new friends.

On the weekends, we were given three days to do independent travel. During this time, I was able to travel to Nottingham, where the story of Robin Hood took place; Liverpool, home of the Beatles; London a second and third time, where I did some major record shopping; York, where I walked the city's narrow streets and saw its surrounding medieval walls, and to Prague, Czech Republic.

It would appear this would be the opportunity of a lifetime for a guy who aspires to travel around the world. But in reality, it was not what I expected. In fact, it was quite a disappointment.

There were two other graduate students – both female – who decided to join the trip with me. I was hoping that the experience would give us a chance to bond since we got off to a bad start having taken the infamous English 5000 class together, which I spoke of earlier. I hoped this experience would give them a better understanding of me and who I was, and it would allow me to get to know them too.

I wasn't much impressed by the group of graduate students who came to Eastern the same time I did. However, I was willing to overlook their faults as well as my own and try for a second chance at friendship.

Things started off well. As soon as we got to Heathrow, we ran into famous singer Rod Stewart, who was gathering luggage from baggage claims, and we played cards together on the ride to Harlaxton Manor. But that was the last of our friendly encounters.

The sad part of the trip was not too many guys came. There were two groups that came; the History group and the English group. Although the history group came with us, they had an agenda of their own and interaction with them was limited, which was unfortunate because they seemed to be really cool people. However, the English group

had a total of 12 students, 9 females and 3 males. Of the two groups combined there were a total of 21 students, 16 females and only 5 males.

Unfortunately, the two groups split rather fast and formed into cliques. The girls pretty much bonded together as they were the majority, which caused some of the guys to feel left out. Once again, I felt myself being left out of the crowd, a situation I was all too familiar with. What is so God awful wrong with me that no one wants me around?

The females were constantly giggling, talking about which actors or professors they thought were hot, and being around them was irritating for I did not care to hear such junior-high nonsense. Whether the girls hanging out together making people such as myself feel left out was intentional or not is hearsay, but it made for one lousy time away from home.

Day after day, the girls gathered at breakfast together, and there was hardly any room for me to sit with them. I felt so left out that I usually found a place to sit on my own. Sure, I made sure I got up to go on little excursions, and I did the homework, but I was lacking companionship with this group.

"You sure do like to be by yourself, don't you?" one of the graduate students asked me, shocked that I would choose to sit away from the group I would be spending an entire month with.

"Yes," I answered her thinking nothing of my anti-social behavior. It's not that I wanted to sit alone. But I didn't make much effort to be part of the group for I felt my male presence was a hindrance from the very get go.

When we took overnight trips, such as to London or the Lake District, I chose to hang out on my own. I remember walking all over the Lake District trying to find my

mother a British, Scottish, or Welsh porcelain doll to add to her collection. Then, I met the group for dinner and a drink at some pub, but then I subtly slunk away from the group to walk all the way back to the hotel we stayed at to retrieve my notebook so I could write a poem out on the docks of the lake. The night was cool and there was a gentle breeze, and I loved being alone.

Yet being alone did take its tolls. I saw how much fun the others were having, and I kind of became jealous. For not one of them knew what it was like to live having Asperger's Syndrome. Not one of them struggled with meeting new people, making new friends, or feeling included in the group. They were having the time of their lives, the way I was promised I would have, yet that feeling never quite came to me. Whenever we took hiking excursions, I made a point to either straggle behind or walk far ahead of everyone as I didn't want to hear them having fun.

I reluctantly gave up a trip to Muscat, Oman for the sake of taking this trip so I could earn school credits. That was my first mistake. I hoped that I would make friends, and all those hopes were starting to shatter. I was miserable. I did not take care of myself meaning I went unshaven, I did not eat much while staying at Harlaxton, I did not sleep much, and at various times I felt suicidal. I almost had to go home because of this behavior. Thousands of dollars wasted because I could not fit in with another group.

What made this whole thing sad was that the social groups already started to form after a day of us being in Europe. Since there were mostly girls, I felt left out. One guy had a girlfriend along on the trip, and some of the other guys, though they were nice, I just did not fit in well with mostly because they liked to party and drink, which was

something I wasn't too interested in doing. However, I needed to be tough and stick this adventure out. Too much money was involved.

Night after night, I would call back home to my mother and she would remind me how lucky I was to get to go overseas a second time, as most of my family has never been overseas at all.

"You need to stick with this, Kris, and complete your master's degree. You'll regret it if you don't. It'll be over sooner than you think and then you'll be back home."

I felt as though I was disappointing my parents, and I was disappointing myself too, but I couldn't help how I felt. I just did not fit in with this group. Had it been another group, another time, things may have been different.

Then, one day I accidentally stumbled on a Web-site blog that one of the girls wrote about when we all went to Liverpool one weekend. We went to the Beatles museum together. It was a good time, but I read that one of the girls said that another one of the guys in the English group, whom I hung around the most on the trip, just invited himself on this particular trip. She didn't say anything about me specifically, but I took it personally. I was fed up. I dissociated myself from the group for the rest of my time there.

One weekend, I had a meltdown and I thought about suicide again. I had to get away. So, the most logical thing for me to do was to pack my bags, catch a flight to another part of the country, have fun and come back with a new outlook on this miserable trip, and tough the rest of the trip out as the final week approached. I chose to go to Prague, Czech Republic, and when I came back to Harlaxton, I decided to stick through the rest of the program. I ended up getting through the class with a B, which was good

enough to earn my six credits. The road was long and tough, but I managed to stick it out. All I lost was a heap of money, a chance to go to Oman, and the chance to make life-long friends. This scenario is nothing new to me in my world of living with Asperger's. But from time to time, I wonder if I were a social butterfly like everyone else, would I really have "had the time of my life?"

Chapter 11: The Guy Who Lived Under the Roc

I remember being invited by colleagues to go for drinks after our first week of presentations for English 5000 class on my first semester of graduate school.

Everyone in the class was required to give a presentation over material we researched relating to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and, fortunately, I did not have to go that night. Instead, I was a spectator for others who were on the program to go first.

However, after class, I remember one of the graduate students coming up to me and asking me if I was going to go hang out with the group and have a couple of drinks at a local bar called Roc's. I really did not want to do this as I was trying to stay away from alcohol, but then I decided that maybe I should. *Come on, Kris, loosen up. Go out and try to mingle some. You might even have fun.*

I should have known better. All semester long the students in this class rubbed me wrong. The majority of them were graduate assistants, and they just irritated me the way they carried themselves with a degree of arrogance and self-importance. So, why did I want to surround myself with the presence of these people? Once again, I had hopes in my head that I would be able to find a group in which I fit in.

I remember walking into Roc's. The lights were dark, and I was nervous as heck being around all those college students who wanted to drink. It had been ages ago since I participated in this kind of behavior. I was a little concerned that my group hadn't come

because I didn't see anyone there, so I took a seat at the bar. The bartender came up to me and said, "Can I help you?"

"Yeah, I'll have a Zima," I responded while looking all over the bar for just one of my colleagues. Then, out of nowhere, two of them came to the bar to order their drinks, and they told me that the group was sitting in the other room as there were two rooms connected. "Come and join us, Kris."

Sure, they sounded inviting and part of me wanted to go, but then the Aspie in me told me to be reserved. So, I responded, "I think I'll just stay here for now. I might join the group later."

"Okay," they said and walked away. I could only imagine what they were saying about me, "***What an unsociable freak. He can't even come and join us to have a beer or something while we talk about all the fun we had in this class.***"

However, keep in mind that this class was not fun for me. These students annoyed me quite a bit. Yet I did want them to be my friends. I tried commanding myself, "*Go on and hang out with them for a while. Maybe you can do it after you've had a couple of drinks.*"

So, there I sat forlorn at my own will wishing for once I wouldn't have acted this way, but there was so much uncertainty on my part, and I caught my AS shining in the limelight. Classic Kris! How I wanted to change this behavior, but I did not have a social coach to help egg me on.

Throughout the night, different ones kept coming up to me trying to coax me into joining them, and I wanted to go, but I just felt comfortable where I was at. So, I ordered a second drink and continued to sit and sip on these indecisive feelings. I don't know if

the alcohol helped loosen me up – and if it did, it is not something on which I wish to rely – but, suddenly, I chose to swallow my pride and join the group. They were happy to see me too. I sat with some of them at a table and watched them converse. I had little to nothing to say, but just the fact that I was there with them was a major feat for me, and I could tell they thought it was too. By night's end, more of them started to leave; one at a time, and I felt more comfortable. I was finally relaxed in a smaller group setting.

Chapter 12: Shorty K's In Da House!

I have had several jobs over the 31 years of my life, including a newspaper reporter, correspondent, television production assistant, and a secretary at the University of Illinois.

For me, the work was hardly a challenge. Personally, I loved going on interviews to write up stories about people and their achievements in the community, and I really loved working alongside several diverse students watching them complete their degree and move on to the next stage of their lives.

However, what I did find most difficult was working alongside some co-workers who did not understand my condition. Instead, they chose to take my bizarre behaviors and taunt me.

Now, I can't say that all co-workers were bad. Over the years, I have met my share of people whom I miss sharing an office with. Yet, in similar fashion to human nature, there are always some bad seeds who make school, work, or other social facets of one's life absolutely miserable.

When I worked at my hometown newspaper, *The Danville Commercial News*, I started off as an employee in the mailroom. My job was to run machinery, which helped stuff ads inside the paper. I worked diligently at this job, sometimes working extra shifts and holidays to help save money that I could apply toward going to school.

Meanwhile, I started talking to the head of the Human Resources department at the newspaper, and I told her of my interest in writing. She told me that if I was patient and continued to work hard that there may be a position in the newsroom that may come

open for me. I took her advice and waited for my opportunity. Sure enough, this chance came to me, and I was able to get my foot in the door.

I became a sports correspondent and worked alongside two sports reporters and a sports editor. My job was to take phone calls throughout the weeknights and write up box scores for various games played at local high schools. I worked hard, and I enjoyed being up in the newsroom with the other reporters, whom I looked up to with hopes they would teach me some techniques that might enhance my creative writing. I enjoyed working with my colleagues, and I especially liked working with my supervisor, who was the sports editor, as he gave me several tasks to do and even let me attend games and write front-page material for the sports section. So far, it was my first dream job, and I loved it.

However, one of the reporters must have not liked me too well because one day I accidentally came upon an unlocked file that contained a Top 14 list of things I have done that have made myself laughable to this guy. The material that was listed inside the file was titled "From the home office in Danville, Illinois – The top 14 most bizarre things about our boy." The title caught my curiosity, and when reading it, I did not think this list was funny. Instead, it was very hurtful as it contained comments such as:

- Peter Vecsey, eat your heart out: "As I sat on the yellow bleachers in my old high school, Danville High School, gymnasium and watched the Lady Vikings warm up..." (From an old story I wrote for the paper)
- The Don Juan of Danville: "The mac-daddy is back in the house." (This is what the kids in high school and junior college used to say about me, so I tried to use this as a social in with my co-workers who apparently thought it was absurd)

- The telephone: should be marked with directions – “This end up.”
(Sometimes the phones were busy, and I may have accidentally picked one up from the wrong end. Is this a sin?)
- The philosopher: “As you can see, change is common in mankind and change is good.” (From another story I wrote)
- Itchin’ for Isaac: Offering a co-worker six fantasy football players for one, Rams receiver Isaac Bruce. (Bruce had an exceptionally good season that year, and this was a fantasy league office workers could participate in. Again, is this a sin?)
- #3: “Shorty K is in da’ house.” (I used to have a warm-up jersey that I wore when playing church basketball that read this. So, I wore it because it was comfortable and it brought back memories. Where’s the crime?)

What hurt me most is the majority of these cracks made toward me were about my writing. I was just beginning and eager to learn. It hurt tremendously and left me in doubt as to whether I should work in sports or not.

Needless to say, this same co-worker made another list about another co-worker in the same file. It was just as offensive, and I brought this to the attention of Human Resources. I do not know what became of this guy after my revelation, but I hope he was taught that he should not write offensive things about other people in a file because you never know who might run into it.

I recall another incident at work in which my character was demeaned by a co-worker. I worked as a newspaper reporter for a little while in a small town called Hoopeston. I did not personally like my editor as I found her way of editing conflicting

with my style of writing. Anyway, I remember wanting to quit the job and move forward, but I decided I shouldn't do it right away. Well, I was just put on some depression medication. I can't recall if it was Paxil, Zoloft, or Prozac as I have been on all three and more throughout a 10 year spell. Anyway, the medicine made me very sleepy and it dilated my eyes some. One of my co-workers literally asked me if I was taking illegal drugs, which outraged me to the point where I just walked away from the job. My feelings were hurt enough to cause me to take such a drastic action.

Yet another instance I was picked on by a co-worker came at the University of Illinois. I worked in a large office full of many people, but one of my closer co-workers started putting me down verbally, almost on a daily basis. I remember when I told her about my time in Meredith, New Hampshire as a reporter, she said I must have not been a very good reporter because I didn't stay out there very long. This was not the case. I left because I was homesick, and this remark offended me.

Another instance in which she offended me was when I was telling her about my 2003 trip to Europe. She had enough gall to tell me that it didn't sound like much of a vacation since I was only staying two weeks. Like she could talk smack to me, she has never even been overseas.

Well, one evening we were working overtime to put on an event for the students who were in our department. We set up tables for refreshments and put on a nice banquet. I did my part in helping set up for the event, but I was offended at the end when she asked me to dump a bucket of ice in the men's bathroom. The request wouldn't have come off as offensive except she literally had to spell out men for me. "That's M-E-N,"

she said as if I was the biggest goof in the world. I wanted to cry, but I held my head up high and did what I was asked to do.

Another time this woman offended me was when I ran out of White Out, and I needed it at that moment to correct something I was working on. I asked her if I could borrow her White Out and she gave me her bottle saying, "This is called White Out. All good secretaries have it. What you do is you open the bottle, dip the brush in the liquid, and then gently paint over the part you made a mistake on." The manner in which she spoke was condescending and it was hurtful. I ended up leaving that office so I could return to school full-time, but I will never forget how I was treated. It made for one miserable experience.

People are different everywhere. People may act out and you don't understand why, but no one should be allowed to make you feel like a worthless employee when in fact you know better. Such was the case for me. To resurrect my role as a philosopher, from the Top 14 Bizarre Things I have done, I believe Forest Gump's mother's philosophy, "Life is like a box of chocolates." Each person represents a different piece of candy and what comes in the middle may be sweet, sour, or just plain disgusting, but you swallow it and go on to the next.

Chapter 13: Family Ties

Aspies are unique, somewhat eccentric, and misunderstood people. People view them as strange, and they do not always know how to deal with an Aspie properly. The condition can be considered a blessing, but, most often, it can also be viewed as a hindrance too.

Living with an Aspie can be a challenge as they do not socialize well or understand different facets of human interaction. To get a better understanding of what it is like to live or know an Aspie, I asked my family to write what they thought of me in light of my condition. This helps bring to reality my condition and what it's like for others to deal with it on a day-to-day basis.

"Kris walks to the beat of a different drum," my mother, Janice, explains about my unique personality.

Specifically, my mother has mentioned my bouts with depression (an offshoot of Asperger's Syndrome), my lack of social skills, my constant alienation away from others in a social setting, and my lack of self-confidence.

"Kris needs an excessive amount of reassurance. It takes a lot of patience and understanding in dealing with Kris at times," she notes.

Throughout the years, she observed my lax joints (that I was able to bend and sit in many unusual positions, including Indian style), an intense absorption in certain subjects, poor motor coordination (my never being able to use my hands well), and my eccentric tics (such as rolling my eyes, etc.). All of these are considered symptoms of AS.

Yet the most intriguing symptom of this condition to my mother is my lack of social skills.

“He doesn’t know how to interact in groups, and he often speaks out with a comment that isn’t related to the subject being discussed. People don’t always understand this, and it has become a source of annoyance to them. People don’t always share his interests and don’t want to discuss them all the time as he seems so eager to do,” she said highlighting the fact that a lot of my conversations tend to be one-sided making me self-centered to those I come in contact with.

My father, Warren, concurs with this notion stating, “I have witnessed many occasions when Kris seemed to feel out of place, and he has been unable to participate in a conversation.”

He also acknowledges the fact that I have been able to do a 180 degree turn-around, which seems to amaze him.

“After he graduated from Eastern Illinois University, he pursued a job as a reporter and moved to Meredith, New Hampshire. After he’d been there about three weeks his mother and I moved some of his furniture out to him. As he was showing us the sites around the town, I was amazed how many people knew him and spoke to him by name – at the bank, the candy store, etc. and even prominent citizens such as the mayor, selectmen, and various entrepreneurs,” he said.

My mother also notes that I did have my share of friends over the years, but most often, I felt inclined to stay to myself, and, as a teenager, I became more of a loner. She notes that my alienation from peers indicated that I was depressed.

"Kris' indifference to peer pressure as well as being very short and small in stature for his age caused him to be teased a lot in high school. He didn't feel he fit in at times, and he started displaying signs of depression."

So, my mother took me to a therapist, and for several years I was diagnosed as having problems with mild depression, as AS was not a common diagnosis during this time. However, now that I have received an accurate diagnosis, my mother hopes that my stories will be able to make people understand what I was dealing with so that in the future they may be more sympathetic.

"I'd like to think that if those individuals had been educated on dealing with people who have a mental illness, their interaction may have been more positive," she said.

Likewise, my sister, Amy, feels growing up with an Aspie wasn't always a piece of cake. She notes how our interests differed.

"As a pre-adolescent, Kris' interests were very odd to me. I was interested in hanging out with my friends and boys. His obsessive interests in certain television shows, like *You Can't Do That On Television*, *Hey Dude*, or *Batman*, were a source of nuisance at times. He would talk about these shows nonstop and he had to watch them every time they were on," she said.

My fiancée, Carissa, wasn't sure what to think of me when we first met in a creative writing class at EIU.

"He was obsessed with the 1980s and Arab culture. He acted very nervous and scared all the time. I thought he was strange, but he seemed like a nice guy. After I found

out that Kris had Asperger's, some of the things I found strange about him started to make sense."

Yet my uniqueness isn't always dismissed as outlandish. My mother notes that I have an enthusiasm for little things that is contagious, and that my enthusiasm makes various excursions memorable.

"During one of our shopping trips to Indiana, we found Tab cola at a grocery store and you would have thought he'd won the lottery," she laughed.

My father is most amazed by my solid memory of useless trivia facts, especially when it comes to the game of baseball.

"One thing that I was always impressed with as Kris was growing up was his incredible memory. He could name every baseball team, their players, and their statistics."

My sister put it best when she said I see the world different from others.

"Kris sees the world through naïve eyes that most of us are not familiar with. His ideas are romantic and hopeful," she said. "His obsessive behaviors can be viewed as strange and eccentric, but his passion for ideas and interests are incomparable."

My fiancée notes that my passionate ideas make for memorable experiences.

"He went all out on our first Valentine's Day by making me dinner, setting an elegant table complete with candles, serenading me with love songs done in karaoke, slow dancing to our song "Wonderful Tonight," and giving me a sapphire bracelet to match my engagement ring and necklace."

My mother remembers an instance in which I made her special day even more special with the assistance of my assertiveness.

“When I was turning 50 years old, there was a concert in Indianapolis on my birthday that included the American Idol singer Clay Aiken. Clay was a personal favorite of mine on the show and for my birthday I asked the family to accompany me to the concert. We purchased the concert tickets. Kris wanted to make my birthday special and wanted to surprise me so he e-mailed the radio station that was sponsoring the concert telling them what a special mother I had been and how he wanted to do something nice for me. Through his persistence, he was able to get me a back stage pass so I could actually meet Clay. Knowing that his sister wanted to meet Clay too, he persuaded the backstage bouncers to let his sister meet him too.”

But my munificence can far be outweighed by egocentricity, as each one of my family members, including my fiancée, noted how selfish I can be from time to time.

“Kris can be very selfish sometimes, such as the fact that, for the most part, when we go places, we usually go to places he likes. Generally, we stay longer than I want when we go out too,” my fiancée complains. “However, he uses his ‘selfish’ attitude to help teach me how to be more assertive so we are both working to balance the time we spend on what he wants to do with the time we spend on what I want to do.”

However, more of my admirable traits consist of being, as my father quotes, a “very truthful, rule-oriented, ethical and moral young man.” Even my sister recalls a time in which my moral behavior was considered a nuisance.

“I always hoped for a brother that would be cool and that I could confide in. Instead, my brother was always too concerned about me and would tattle on my bad behaviors,” she explains. “I later learned that as an Aspie, Kris has a high moral value and is a rule follower. This is why he behaved this way.”

My fiancée hopes that I can learn from my behaviors to help change my ways, but she also expresses her gratitude for having me in her life.

“I tell him that once he recognizes the good and bad aspects of his condition, he will be able to work on strengthening the good and minimizing the bad,” she said. “I’m thankful for him because I don’t think anybody understands me as well as he does. We understand each other’s feelings, mainly because at some point or another we have experienced similar circumstances.”

My mother wants to stress that dealing with an Aspie is not always easy, but she wants to really emphasize that “with love and patience an Aspie can lead normal lives and be a productive member of society.”

In his book *Asperger's Syndrome: A Guide for Parents and Professionals*, Tony Attwood is quoted as saying, “In this author’s opinion, they [Aspies] are a bright thread in the rich tapestry of life. Our civilization would be extremely dull and sterile if we did not have and treasure people with Asperger’s Syndrome.” This is a quote in which each member of my family will attest too, and it is what makes me who I am, unique.

Part 2: Repetitive Behaviors and Interests

Chapter 14: Prized Possessions

Over the years, I have had many eccentric collections. The money I have invested in these collections has been tremendous, and the time I have devoted was precious, but collecting things has been a strong point in my life. I guess you could even go so far as to say I would give Fred G. Sanford a run for his money in the amount of junk I have collected over the years.

According to my mother, as a young child I used to collect countless puzzles to dump and put back together. I used to ask countless times to acquire these puzzles, which featured cartoon characters such as Voltron or The Peanuts. She said I was fascinated with putting these puzzles together and making a perfect fit. For me, everything has to fit.

Once I retired my puzzle habit, I took up collecting Star Wars figures. I was in competition with neighbors and friends to see who could own the most figures. I located most of the figures, but I didn't get all the spaceships or settings, such as Ewok Village, that a lot of my peers seemed to have. I was green with envy, but I was grateful and did enjoy the ones I attained, and it kept me and my friends off the streets and out of trouble.

After a while, I resorted to collecting ventriloquist dolls. I aspired to have them all, but I only ended up with three: Danny O'Day, Charlie McCarthy, and Lester. I wasn't all that great at throwing my voice, and my obsession with collecting these life-like dolls ended upon me viewing Saturday Nightmares' movie *The Dummy*, which was a movie featured in the early 90's in which a doll came to life and viciously killed human beings. It scared me so much that I had to beat the stuffing out of Danny O'Day, whom I felt was always watching me – even when I went to the bathroom.

Then, I collected baseball cards. My favorite team was the Chicago Cubs, but this didn't matter when I collected cards because my goal was to obtain all teams. I used to ride my bike with several of my childhood friends to this sports shop called Sports Vendor where I would spend my weekly allowance on baseball cards. Sports Vendor also had a guy who would buy cards that were priced in a book at a certain value. I remember opening up cards like Roger Clemens, Tony Gwynn, and Don Mattingly and if I already had their card, I would trade in their value, which was usually close enough to buy another pack of cards. This is how I accumulated so many cards at a fairly rapid pace. I probably have enough to build a house of cards, but I do have several kept laminated in books with plastic sheets, and I have several boxed sets from 1987-1989 that I have in storage.

I also had a spell with board games, and I used to collect them over the years too. I didn't just play Monopoly, Clue, and Operation, but I really enjoyed playing games like Happy Days, Where's the Beef?, The Peanuts, and baseball games like Strat-o-matic Baseball. The baseball games were the most important to me as I used to spend hours playing faux games and keeping track of stats.

Another strange collection I had going was basketball caps. For a while, I replaced baseball with a passion for basketball, and I had to have all the teams that were in the NBA. I love looking at these old caps to look at the old team logos they had in retrospect. It's funny to see how the team uniforms and logos have changed over the years. Sometimes, you can recall fond memories just by looking at a simple team logo.

As I got older, I started collecting other things to suit my entertainment needs. Soon, I started collecting movies that I remembered watching as a kid. At first, I started

focusing on horror adding movies such as *Friday The 13th*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and *Carrie*. Then, I focused on comedies such as *The Jerk*, *Sixteen Candles*, and *National Lampoon's Vacation*. Then, I focused on the obscure such as *The Children*, *Sybil*, and *The Brood*. Today, I go to pawnshops, video stores, flea markets, garage sales, and urban stores to hunt down my favorite movies. My only problem is finding a place to keep them all neatly in my room, which seems to be a haven for junk.

For the longest time, I had a passion for collecting cassette tapes and records of bands from the 1980's. This obsession started out strangely enough and has evolved throughout the years.

During the 1980's, I was into music from the 1960's. Instead of listening to Duran Duran, I was listening to The Monkees. I even tried to grow my hair long in the back just like Davy Jones – much to my parents' dismay as they said it looked too "girly."

Then, the 1990's came like a "Bat out of Hell," and it was time for change as I outgrew my taste for music from the 1960's. I didn't quite find the grunge/alternative scene satisfying, so I started to listen to the decade I neglected growing up.

I used to tune into VH-1's *We Are the Eighties*. I loved it. Soon, I found myself falling in love with the music I neglected as a child. I even went to pawn shops and started buying \$1 cassette tapes of different music from this decade. I worked at my hometown newspaper – which is conveniently located near the town's two pawn shops – so I was able to support my growing habit.

Soon, it became an obsession. Every day, I went to the pawnshops, and I would even scour nearby flea markets looking for tapes. My collection was growing out of control, and I was acquiring approximately up to 10 a week.

The range of music I listened to varied. From the light pop sounds of Peter Cetera and Phil Collins to the beginning of rap music with artists such as Biz Markie. I even had a spell with metal and the famous glam/hair bands – Poison, Winger, and Warrant.

By the time I quit collecting tapes, I had already acquired more than 2,000 of them, which I always had in alphabetical order from ABBA to ZZ Top. I never really listened to all of them. Instead, I listened to whatever song popped into my head – at any given moment – and then I put them in a case to later collect dust.

Continuing to watch *We Are the Eighties*, I was introduced to a new genre of music. This music is known as new wave. Its strange, eclectic sounds captivated me. Bands I never knew of like A Flock of Seagulls, Missing Persons, and The Go-Go's became special staples to my every day listening pleasure.

I even started to collect the, "Just Can't Get Enough of New Wave: Hits of the 80's" series on tape. I was introduced to hardcore new wave songs, such as "Teenage Enema Nurses in Bondage" by Killer Pussy or "C'est Plane Pour Moi" by Plastic Bertrand, a French band. I don't even know French!

One day, I was surfing the Internet and I found a site called New Wave Outpost. I used this site as a bible for my collection, and it listed a variety of bands I never heard of that had music from this genre.

"I will own every one of them," I said in a cocky, smug voice of reassurance knowing full well I would do my damndest to achieve that goal. Yet, to do so, I had to

change the medium of my collection to LP records – since this was the form most of these bands used.

I visited nearby record shops, and browsed their content assiduously acquiring unusual sounding bands that mainly came out of Australia, Canada, and Europe as well as the United States.

Shortly after, I started visiting metro areas and, occasionally, other states to locate records. I even took a trip as far as Boston and perused Harvard Square in 2002, which I called “Heaven” for record shops. The very next year, I went overseas to Europe and did more record shopping in London and Munich. Now, I have a library of more than 2,500 LP records that also sit around and collect dust.

Today, I have stopped buying so many records, but I still tend to work toward the goal of having all the bands. As tenacious as I am, I will probably get there, but, in the meantime, I enjoy listening to both my records and tapes. I have let my wide-scope variety of music define who I am – eccentric music for an eccentric guy.

My latest collection takes me on journeys world-wide. I have delved into collecting coins from other countries in the world. This hobby started on my first international trip to Europe in 2003. While flying to London’s Heathrow via Chicago’s O’Hare airport, I sat next to a man from Australia who talked to me on the plane. He told me about his adventures from the land down under and how he has traveled all over the United States, Canada, and most recently Europe. I was impressed, and, soon, I did the unthinkable. I got enough courage to ask the man for Australian coins, and, fortunately, he gave me some.

Then, I exchanged American money for British pounds, Swiss francs, and Euros,

as I was planning to go all over Europe. Also, one of the people on my tour group, who came from Australia, got a hold of a Macedonian coin which he gave to me once he learned of my hobby. He said he has family in Macedonia, and he was planning to visit there before returning to the "Land Down Under."

These were the first coins I acquired for my collection. Soon, thereafter, I started to acquire coins from Russia, Mexico, China, and France by buying grab bags from a coin shop I visit frequently in Champaign. Then, I started to focus on buying only Middle Eastern coins, which I got from various coin shops around the area and from Ebay.com from a guy named "Digga from Dover" in New Hampshire. Now, I pretty much have coins from all around the world except for Liechtenstein or Montenegro.

I also went through a spell in which I had to collect movies with drug commercial ads on them. These public service announcements were brought to viewers from the Partnership for a Drug Free America, and they were located on movies from International Video Entertainment and its sister company, LIVE. The ads preached on the dangers of marijuana, cocaine, heroin, etc. I remembered watching them all on television when I was a child, and there was one in particular which scared the crap out of me. It was about a doctor who smoked marijuana before surgery and swore the patient was to receive tonsillitis when he really was having appendicitis. The ad creeped me out as a child, and I wanted to find it to show my children. One day I went to Family Video, and I checked out a movie called *Drop Dead Fred*, which starred Phoebe Cates, and sure enough, the LIVE movie had a copy of this ad on it. I thought I was going crazy trying to track down this public service announcement, and this was the only copy I could find. So, I went out and bought my own copy of the movie, and then decided to go in and ask if I could

exchange it for a copy with the ad on it. They gave me a look as if I were the strangest person they ever saw, but they agreed to let me have their copy in exchange for mine.

Now, I can watch the ad anytime I want and know that I was not dreaming it up.

I am anxious to see what the next collection in my life will be. If I was only as inspired to collect money as I was to collect junk, I probably give Donald Trump or Paris Hilton a run for their money. Yet I wouldn't trade my prized possessions for anything in the world for the mere fact that they define me and my eccentricity.

Chapter 15: Take Me In To the Ballgame

“Mom always said don’t play ball in the house,” Bobby Brady echoed on behalf of Carol Brady when Peter threw a ball that broke her favorite vase on an episode of *The Brady Bunch*. I never listened to my mom all that well when it came to this rule because I had a whole baseball stadium inside my house.

During my childhood, I was always fascinated with the game of baseball. My first ballgame was a trip to Wrigley Field in 1984 where I saw my favorite team the Chicago Cubs, who actually won a pennant that year only to lose the chance to advance to the World Series as they were pummeled by Steve Garvey and the San Diego Padres. After the game was over, I went to a souvenir shop across the street and bought two jerseys; one was the white, striped Cubs uniform, which they wore at home games, and a dark blue shirt they wore while on the road.

Prior to the start of each new season, I would buy baseball magazines such as *Street and Smith’s Baseball* to study up on the odds each team had for that year. It would come complete with reviews of the teams, expectations, and rosters. I used this as a “Baseball bible.” Back then, I knew just about every player, what team they played for, and what position they played.

Often, I would spend my free time playing baseball board games – most notably Strat-o-matic Baseball, which came with authentic line-up cards as part of its contents. Most of the time, I used these line-up cards for my own purposes, which required having my mother make copies of them for me at work. It was about this time that I got the zany

idea to create Jones Field inside my house and use its dimensions to replicate a ball field for my own creative purposes.

The set up of Jones Field consisted of using my sister's room as left field, my parents' room as centerfield, and the dining room as right field. True dimensions of an actual ball field were lost as I suited the game around the design of the house. I would lay pillows or magazines around the living room floor in kind of a rectangle shape to make up the infield. What happened to the diamond shape, Jones? Anyhow, it's funny in retrospect because the third baseman and shortstop would have been standing right on top of each other. But I was young with an active imagination that would permit this kind of gobbledygook.

Home plate was merely a ball glove located dead center at the bottom of our wooden front door. The mound was in between home plate and very close to first base! HA! I would always use a soft, rubber ball, and I would pitch it at the door. It would come bouncing back to me, I would field it with a glove, and I would send it in the direction I wanted the action to happen.

If I wanted a double to right field, I would throw the ball in the dining room to bounce around in the corner. Meanwhile, it was left for the imaginary audience to believe the runner would settle in with a double or take his chances and try to stretch it into a triple. I would try to provide colorful commentary as the action took place.

My sister had a net in her room where she kept stuffed animals. If I decided a player should hit a homerun to left field, I would just enter my sisters' room, unannounced, and throw the ball into the net. Sometimes, my sister would be in her

room, and she would be aggravated that I entered without asking, but she soon got over it and she is able to laugh at it now. After hitting a homerun, I would run all the bases.

My parents' room was often open for such activity during the day. They had a giant bed in which I threw the ball and dove on the bed to try to make a spectacular play. If I made the catch, I would often scream, "Did you see that catch? What an amazing play!" If I missed, I let it roll around and allowed the runner to stand in with a double or triple.

In the infield; grounders, pop flies, and line drives were common. Double plays were simple. I would start with a grounder to third base or shortstop; they would field and toss the ball to the second baseman. Then, he would fire it to first. Sometimes, I made bad throws and these would be scored as errors. These mistakes were marked, and they were common in forms of dropped fly balls, grounders that skipped past the fielder, or bad throws.

When a player reached base, he would often exercise the strategy of stealing a base. I would have the runner take off from first and slide head first into a pillow. If the tag was applied before the runner reached the pillow, he was out. If the tag was late, he was safe. Most times, speedy lead-off men like Mookie Wilson or Bob Dernier stole a base successfully although any player could attempt; some with varied to little to no success.

Lineup cards were filled out with great detail including the players' names and positions. Then, in the columns for play-by-play, I would keep track of their game stats. Pinch hitters, fielder substitutions, and pitching changes were often tracked making the lineup card look real messy like a real one filled out by a Major League manager.

Most important, I loved to keep track of these game statistics. It's amazing that I never became a statistician. I kept marks for singles, doubles, triples, homeruns, runs batted in, game winning RBIs, stolen bases, and at bats. For pitchers, I kept track of: Innings pitched, earned runs, hits allowed, homeruns allowed, earned run average (ERA), walks, and strikeouts.

A strikeout was simple. I would fire what I thought were three perfect pitches at the door, and the umpire, me, would call all three strikes. This led to arguments between players and/or managers and the umpire, and, sometimes, the occasion called for player or manager ejections.

And every time I played baseball in the house, I was the Chicago Cubs. However, I was open-minded about what team they played. I used to dress up in my Little League baseball white pants, one of my Cubs shirts (depending if it was a road or home game), and a Chicago Cubs hat. Leon Durham, the Cubs first baseman back then was my favorite player, and he would always accumulate astronomical stats during a game.

Jones Field ceased to exist in the early 90's when my father decided to add on to the house. The structure changed so that it could never be made to fit another "Baseball in the House" game again. From that point, baseball either had to be watched on television or enjoyed outside with the accompaniment of friends.

Back then, though, why play the game outside, when you could use your imagination inside the realms of your own house? Not that being outside harmed me in any way – except for exposing myself to the sun's cancer-causing, gleaming rays. My idea of "Baseball in the House" was perfect because it was creative, there were no big money contracts to contend with, admission was free, and action was plentiful.

Chapter 16: You Are What You Eat

Aspies have strange quirks. One of my strangest quirks lies within my eating habits. How many people have ritualistic eating habits for a Kit-Kat bar or a Little Debbie's Nutty Bar, pick out certain colors in the Starburst/Skittles spectrum, have a particular way for ordering hamburgers, or even have a love for only the marshmallows in cereals that contain them?

Give me a break...Give me a break...Break me off a certain piece of that Kit-Kat Bar. I must be the strangest consumer of Kit-Kat candy ever. First, I have to eat both of the chocolate ends off of the bar. Then, I eat the chocolate on the sides leaving the wafers at the bottom and top for the final go-around. Once I have taken these steps, I take one wafer off at a time and lick the sugar off before finishing it. It's weird because nine times out of ten, the damn bar starts to melt by the time I have completed this ritual. And I do mean ritual because this is how I eat a Kit-Kat every time I bite into the scrumptious candy.

The same happens with a Little Debbie's Nutty Bar. How I love to rip off the wafers from the bottom and lick the peanut butter off the top. One by one until it is all gone and nothing is left but the melted chocolate on top of my fingers. Mmm mmm, good!

Then, I have a certain habit for the way I eat Starburst or Skittles. For Starburst, I only eat the lemon and cherry flavored candy. I usually throw the orange and strawberry chews away unless I find some other soul who is willing to take them off my hands. When I eat Skittles, I can only eat the orange, lemon, and lime, otherwise, I end up

pitching the rest in the garbage. Can one fathom spending almost a dollar per package only to throw away half of the mix?

When I go to fast food restaurants, I love to order certain sandwiches. Take Wendy's, for example. Every time I go, I order the same meal: a plain spicy chicken with Pepper-jack cheese and a slice of bacon. I believe the cheese and bacon make the sandwich spicier. I am sure they think I am strange, but they always serve me my sandwich with a smile. Whenever I go to Taco Bell, I always order a Number 8, which features three soft tacos and a large drink. Anything else would be unacceptable, as I abhor most Mexican food. Whenever I go to a hamburger joint, I always make sure that I get a plain sandwich. The only exception I will make is cheese, which I shouldn't have too much of since I am lactose intolerant. I will always ask to withhold the ketchup, mustard, pickles, and onions. Sometimes, I am so predictable that most places, if they know me, know what I will order upon my arrival.

Even when I go to Blimpie or Subway, I always order the same sub over and over, "One turkey on honey oat with Pepper-jack or Swiss cheese and nothing on it but oregano." The looks I get are priceless. When eating Chinese, I usually just stick to Kung Pao chicken. At my hometown in Danville, I always order the same dish, "One half order of Kung Pao chicken with no peanuts or water-chestnuts with extra mushrooms and broccoli with white rice." Even when I get a soft drink from the fountain, I never put ice in my drink as I feel that ice waters the soda.

Then, I always eat cereal cold. "No milk. That's right! No milk." Despite the looks I get from the waitresses and the comments of shock such as, "You like cold cereal," I scarf my cereal down one spoonful at a time. If I eat cereals like Count Chocula

or Lucky Charms, I go through and eat all the marshmallows first and let the cereal go bad. Unfortunately, my parents wouldn't buy me these brands of cereal when I was younger for the mere fact that I wasted their money.

When eating a home cooked meal, I always put vegetables with juice on a separate plate for fear that the juice will run into my meat. Even at Thanksgiving, I will do this, which makes it bad for whoever is in charge of dishes. Peas, carrots, green beans, I like them all, but I like them separated from my main entrée.

Another eccentricity I have is I won't eat eggs. I detest eggs. Superman had kryptonite that made him weak, and Kris Jones has eggs. I never could stand the smell of these atrocious things and just to think about eating one makes me want to puke my guts out. Yet I do love cakes and cookies? The same applies to oranges and grapes. I can't tolerate oranges, but I love orange juice, and I do not like grape juice, but I love white grapes.

Looking back over the years, I know that I am odd, and I know I have eccentric behaviors that make me this way, but I am able to see these unique traits that make me who I am today. They say, "You are what you eat." Well, if that's true, it's no wonder I am so odd!

Chapter 17: The Determinator

A Swedish proverb reads, "Those who wish to sing, always find a song." Such is true in this statement about determination. One of my most unique traits as an Aspie is my determination. I let nothing stop me from what it is I am trying to acquire or do.

I remember once looking for a movie I watched on U.S.A.'s *Saturday Nightmares* back in the late eighties/early nineties. The title was *The Unborn*. It was about a woman who gave birth to an evil test tube baby who went around killing other people. In the end, the mother tries to protect her newborn infant despite its murderous ways. I was bound and determined to own this movie, so I set forth the challenge to find it.

First, I visited the two pawnshops we have in Danville. I scoured both shops' movie selection to no avail and ended up frustrated. Then, I decided to go to the Hollywood Video and Tanning Salon store in Georgetown – three towns away from Danville – to look at their video store. They had the movie, but it was only for rent, and they said they did not want to sell it since it was their only copy.

"I bet they would sell it to me if I called every night to see if it was in and they said yes out of frustration. By ten times of constant calling, they would be ready to forgo the movie," I said to my fiancée in a fit of laughter with serious undertones. I am not above such antics to get what I want.

After going to all the video stores in Danville, I still had no luck. Then, it was time for me to go back to school. After arriving to Charleston, I decided to hit the pawnshops again even making a stop in Mattoon. Still, no luck! I was starting to get

severely disappointed, and, normally, I would settle for ordering it off of Ebay, since I do not like to wait, but I wanted to find this movie on my own, in my own way.

Then, I decided to come back to Charleston, and I said I would try Family Video as my last resort. Luckily, I hit the jackpot. There it was sitting on the shelf with all the dust it collected from never being rented. A sticker saying I could buy the damn movie for \$2.50 made me so happy that I almost had visions of hearing Vangelis' "Chariots of Fire" and holding it in the air to show off my pride.

Another example in which I showed off my determination was to move to New England. After acquiring my Bachelor's degree in Journalism, I was determined on moving away from Danville for a while. At first I chose to concentrate on Seattle as my destination, but after several rejection letters, I grew weary and decided to focus on the Northeast.

I had been to the Northeast before. In 1990, my parents took my sister and I to Maine and we drove through up-state New York, Vermont, New Hampshire, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. It was very scenic, and it was a most memorable time. I remember going to Kennebunk Beach, which happens to be my all-time favorite resort area in the United States as it provides total relaxation by the Atlantic. I figured moving to New England would be more fit for me than to head clear out to Washington. So, I started sending resumes to no avail. I got a phone interview for a paper in Massachusetts, which turned out to be a joke, as they wanted a reporter to write and earn pay per story. I could not afford to move out there all alone on that kind of dough.

After receiving rejection letters from papers in Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island, I decided to make a phone call to a town

called Wolfeboro, New Hampshire. Their paper did not have a need for a reporter, but they knew of one that did. Fortunately, they gave my resume to the paper, and a couple weeks later, a newspaper called the *Meredith News* located in Meredith, New Hampshire, which sits out on the bay of New Hampshire's largest lake, Lake Winnepesaukee. Shortly after the interview, I was offered the job, and I moved away from home for the first time to become a successful newspaper reporter. I did my job well until six months I started growing homesick for my family, all of whom lived in Illinois, so I decided to come back. However, it was my persistence that paid off and gave me the opportunity to try and spread my wings despite a disappointing outcome.

One last example is when my fiancée and I decided to go to Chicago on a whim for a day-trip. I remember finding a nice little Middle Eastern restaurant in Palos Heights when going to Chicago on my own, so I was bound and determined to find Palos Heights again and treat her to a Middle Eastern cuisine. I remember stopping off at a gas station in Orland Park asking for directions on how to get to Palos Heights. "It's just down the road a little ways" is what I thought I heard the gas attendant say, but it turned out either he was wrong or I wasn't listening. My bet goes on the latter part. So, my fiancée and I were driving in a familiar area, and I told her we shouldn't be too far from Palos Heights. Yet we never saw Palos Heights. I kept telling her, "It has to be up the road a little way," and she was patient enough to take my word. About an hour later, she started to get impatient, and I was dumbfounded. Still, I was determined to find it.

"If we start seeing airplanes, you know we have gone too far," I told her as I could tell she was getting slightly agitated. "Just stick with me here, I know what I am

doing.” Foolishly, she sat back and believed me. About a half an hour later, we started seeing airplanes landing in the runway at O’Hare. We made it to Rosemont!

She looked at me with glowing demon-like eyes, and her face was getting flustered with anger. So, I pleaded with her, “Maybe it’s past the airport a little way,” and we drove into Des Plaines. Finally, we left Des Plaines and Cook County altogether. We entered Lake County. Now, I knew it wasn’t in Lake County, so I admitted defeat offering to take my fiancée to an International House of Pancakes to make up for my stubbornness.

I had to pull over in Lake County to get gas, and I remember asking an Arabic man how to get to Palos Heights. He laughed and told me I was a long way out of my way. It was quite funny to me, but not to my fiancée. I told her over and over again, “From now on, you get to navigate, and I promise I won’t go looking for any more Arabian restaurants.”

That was one instance in which my determination failed me, but I do have it, and I have to admit it is strong. Sometimes, my determination is key in getting me places where I want to go or doing things I want to do, otherwise, just like my condition with Asperger’s, it can be annoying from time to time.

Chapter 18: Empathy

I remember going to work on September 11, 2001. I was on the shuttle bus going to the University of Illinois College of Liberal Arts and Sciences when another U of I employee asked me if I heard what happened on the radio.

“No,” I said with a look of bewilderment all over my face.

“A couple of air planes ran into the Twin Towers in New York,” she said. “Other than that I am not to sure what happened.”

Curiosity got the better of me when I went to work. Everyone in my office had radios, Internet, and even televisions on listening to the news. Pandemonium and chaos ensued across America as we were being invaded by the terror group al-Qaeda.

Now, I remember first reading about Osama bin Laden on the www.fbi.gov Web-site, and I remember very few details about al-Qaeda’s attack on Kenya and Tanzania U.S. embassies and the USS Cole in Yemen. Still, I had no idea they were capable of such diabolical actions that led to this tragic day.

Subsequently, much to my chagrin, my co-workers and I heard of another attack against the Pentagon in Washington. We also heard of another plane that was crashed in Pennsylvania that was headed toward Washington D.C. that was a part of this terrorist attack.

Lives were lost and remains of ashes and rubble spread throughout New York. People were worried about loved ones far and near, and it was one of America’s darkest days.

Despite the tragedy suffered by Americans, I couldn't help to feel sorry for the Arabs too. I mean it wasn't their whole culture who were responsible for such destruction. Instead, it was the cowardly practices of al-Qaeda. Yet I remember reading of different hate crimes committed against Arab mosques. I was ashamed of such Americans who would retaliate in this ignorant fashion, and my heart went out to the Muslim community.

I already had friends who were half Arabian. One of my close friends' father was from Egypt and another of my friends' father was from Iran. Although both are of the Christian community, I still felt ashamed that such hatred was shown toward the Arab and Muslim culture because of the actions of a select few.

Prior to working at the U of I, I never had many dealings with the Arab or Muslim culture, but I found them very fascinating. I remember seeing a young Muslim woman on the shuttle bus I caught to work one morning. She wore regular clothes, but she wore a veil to cover her hair which indicated her Muslim heritage. She was beautiful and her culture was fascinating to me. So much that I wanted to start learning of life in the Middle East.

Having worked at the U of I for quite a while, I occasionally ran into several Muslim students. I talked to them whenever they came in our office, and I tried to ask about their homelands. I met people from Palestine, Syria, and the United Arab Emirates. Then, I met another guy who was from Beirut, Lebanon, who was giving a presentation at the U of I Student Union of his hometown. He was so proud of his homeland, and it looked beautiful – before all the current destruction done by the Israeli-Hezbollah war.

My next dealing with the Arab culture came in Palos Heights in Chicago where I found an Arabic store that specialized in selling various knick-knacks of Arabian descent. I bought two Arabian CD's, (Arabian Love Songs and Arabian Idol), to listen to in my car. While shopping in this store, I met a nice guy from Jordan and talked to him for a while.

Then, I decided to go to grad school. In grad school, I took a play writing class. I wanted to write a play that spoke against this type of prejudice against Arabs. So, I decided to create a couple – one of who worked at a university, like myself, and was interested in learning of the Arab culture, and his girlfriend, whose parents were prejudiced toward Arabs. The couple later meets another couple, a guy from Muscat, Oman, and a girl from Damascus, Syria, and form a close friendship with them which helps the girl speak up against her parents prejudice attitude.

For inspiration, my professor, Dr. David Radavich, had me visit a mosque in Champaign where I got to attend a Muslim service and learn how they pray. They pray facing the east toward the Mecca in Saudi Arabia, and they pray on Persian rug prayer mats. To express humility, they laid face first on the floor while praying. They also take off their shoes upon entrance to the mosque.

Afterward, I talked to two guys from Turkey. They introduced me to the Imam (a Muslim preacher) and he gave me several pamphlets about Islam, and I told him about my writing project for which he seemed enthused. I learned he was from Iraq.

Then, I met Maliq, who was from Algeria, and we started talking about religion. He called me, "His brother in religion whether or not I chose the Muslim faith." His words uplifted me and proved that the Muslim and Arab cultures were full of good

people; people who were just misunderstood, like myself. So, I feel I was able to empathize with them.

During the summer of 2006, I went to Europe for the second time to study abroad, and this time I had many interactions with the Arabian culture. I met a man on a train who lived in Dubai and worked in Muscat, Oman, a place I desire to vacation one day, and he gave me some Omani coins. I was also able to find Omani stamps too. Then, I found out that my British bus driver, Dave, also used to live in Oman, and he told me all about it.

That trip was very productive for me. I got to try many different ethnic cuisines including Lebanese, Iranian, Bangladeshi, Indian, and Nepalese. I also met people from Egypt, Iran, and Sudan. It was an eye opening experience. On the way home, I sat in Heathrow to try to pass time. I saw an Arabian woman and her family, and I said, "Marhaba," which is Arabic for hello, and asked her how she was. She said she was fine, and once their flight was called I looked at her husband and family, smiled, and said, "Ma'asalaama," which is goodbye, and she and her children lit up with smiles and gave the same response to me.

From that point on, I joined MySpace.com where I have several Arabian friends from all over the Middle East and Northern Africa. Every now and again, they will tell me a little about their lives overseas, and I find it fascinating. So much that I plan to make a trip to Muscat, Oman and Tripoli, Libya, in the future to see some of the sites they see on a daily basis.

These days, I collect Arabian paper money, coins, and stamps. I also try to collect other knick-knacks such as rocks or books on how to speak Arabic, which I am trying to

teach myself. I also like to eat Arabian food some of my favorite dishes being falafel and baklava. I love to go to the Jerusalem House in Champaign, which is an Arabian cuisine restaurant, and I check the news almost every day to see what is going on in the land I inspire to visit.

These are not my people. I did not grow up Arabian or Muslim, but I feel connected to them through love for mankind. They are very interesting people who live an interesting lifestyle. Their devotion and love to Allah serves as an inspiration to my religious quest to become close to God. I get so tired of the media and ignorant people portraying the Arab culture in a negative light. I want to fight and rid the world of terrorism too, but I don't want to persecute a whole culture to do so. They matter, and they are misunderstood by many. And it is for that reason they will remain close to me until my death, for I too feel misunderstood and looked down upon by today's society.

Chapter 19: Dressed For Success

Barbara Kirby, founder of Online Asperger Syndrome Information and Support (OASIS) Web-site, says that Aspies are sensitive to various senses. She states that Aspies may prefer soft clothing. Well, I must have my way when dressing. One of my strangest behaviors is trying to find clothes I like. As an Aspie, I have to wear clothes made of certain colors, textures, brands, and materials.

Take socks, for example. I will not wear white socks with gray material at the heel and toe. Not to long ago, I bought socks like these at a local Dollar General store because I couldn't find anything else and I was in dire need of socks. After I bought these socks, my fiancée and I went shopping in Greenup, and I found a store that sold all white socks for a higher price. So, I bought the plain white socks and had to make a special trip back to Dollar General to return the gray-material socks. When asked why I wanted to return the socks, I said, "Because I don't like the way they feel." I got a strange look, but, nonetheless, the sales associate let me make the return.

Also, I do not wear dress socks because they are too slick and they don't keep my feet warm enough. Every time I wear dress socks, my feet slide around inside my shoe, and it just doesn't feel right, so I wear white socks. Even when I dress up in a suit, I still wear white socks. True, it looks tacky, and most often I am embarrassed, but I go for what makes me feel comfortable.

Dress pants are always impossible for me to find. I have to feel the material to see if it's too thick or stiff. I like my pants to be extra soft. So, I often buy cotton khakis for

dress pants, but they can't be gray or blue. I also do not like regular suit pants that are made of polyester.

For a while, I went through a phase where my clothes had to be retro. So, I shopped for the Izod shirts (with the alligators on them), and I wouldn't buy any other pairs of jeans other than Sergio Valente or Jordache. I used to love shopping at Value City or Burlington Coat Factory where I could find these brands still on the shelf.

I used to like turtlenecks when I was in grade school, but now I absolutely despise them. They are too heavy, and they choke me. I do not care for short-sleeve shirts or tank-tops since I do not have the build to parade in them. I also don't like heavy, itchy shirts like flannel or wool sweaters.

I am by no means trying to say that Aspies are only subject to the things I mentioned above, but as far as sensitivity goes to certain material, brands, or colors, I am unique. For most people, what they wear expresses who they are. For me, I just like to wear materials that I find soft or fit to my standards. Otherwise, I could care less if I was voted "Worst Dressed."

Chapter 20: Desire for Truth

Back in 1989, I took a long family vacation to California with my parents and my sister, Amy. It was a good time. We planned to visit Los Angeles and Hollywood. Also, we went to visit my mother's aunt and uncle's house in Santa Barbara.

We filled the car with snacks, games, and notebooks to keep us entertained as we trekked forth in our brown Chrysler. Along the way, we listened to the radio. I remember Jimmy Harnen's song, "Where Are You Now?" came over the airwaves multiple times throughout the trip, and whenever I hear that song today, I think of California.

I had to sit in the back seat with my sister, who always managed to get carsick when on vacation.

"How are you feeling, Amy," my mom asked in concern somewhere in the middle of Arizona?

"I'm starting to feel sick," Amy responded. She was 10 that year.

"Warren, pull over to this gas station up here and let Amy have some air," mom commanded, as my dad followed her instructions.

Having witnessed my sister vomit on multiple other occasions, I didn't want to stay and see what was about to happen, so I ran to a pop machine. Lo and behold, I started pressing the buttons without having put in the required fifty cents. I pressed the Dr. Pepper button, and, sure enough, out came a Dr. Pepper.

I was amazed that I didn't even pay for it, and I got the kind of pop I wanted by the simple press of a button. I didn't even stop to think that it may have been someone else's pop that had to step away for a moment. In the blaring sun, I happily opened up the

can, hearing that nice, refreshing click of the tab. I took a swig, and it was refreshing as we had passed throughout the dry desert land all day in our quest.

After drinking its icy cold content, a feeling of guilt settled inside me. Why? I am not sure. But being a boy of ethical values, I went inside the gas station and explained to the guy behind the counter what happened. Then, I gave the man fifty cents and apologized twice. He looked at me rather dumbfounded as he was most notably impressed with my ethical decision or else he was saying, "What a moron!"

Ever since then, both my parents and sister laugh at this account, but I feel it represented the kind of moral beliefs I have today: Don't take what isn't yours. The aim of this story is to emphasize my obsession with being truthful.

Chapter 21: Picky, Picky

Earlier, I mentioned in another story that I am a very picky eater. Barbara Kirby also says Aspies can be overly sensitive to taste. This rings true for myself. I am set in my ways of things I like and things I don't like and not much will break that barrier. Well, I guess I should say that was until I met my fiancée and her father. They were bound to do the impossible.

There are a number of foods or condiments I cannot stand such as: beans, mayonnaise, and pickle relish. However, my fiancée was hip to the fact that I love trying different ethnic foods. So, her father cooked up the idea of calling a dish "Thai legumes."

"Have you ever had any Thai legumes, Kristopher," he asked, as I saw smirks coming from the rest of the family including my fiancée. This made me very suspicious, and I was about to look up "Thai legumes" on the Internet. Then, I thought maybe these legumes are some sort of mushrooms done in a Thai sauce, and for some reason it appealed to me since I love mushrooms. Yet they would never tell me for sure what it was.

The next day, he decided to fry my fiancée and I some potatoes, made with red pepper. Also, unknown to me, he was creating his mysterious "Thai legumes."

"Kristopher, are you ready for fried potatoes and Thai legumes," he asked trying his hardest not to laugh. Still not knowing what they were, I very reluctantly said, "Okay."

I waited for him to scoop up the potatoes and the legumes. I was scared out of my head as to what legumes were. It sounded more French to me than Thai, but then again, I don't know everything – like I think I do.

Much to my vexation, he brought my plate out and I saw this big blob of what looked like bean salad on my plate. "Go ahead and try the legumes," he said as my fiancée was trying to contain her laughter also.

"Come on, Kris. I ate at Indian and Thai restaurants for you. The least you can do is try these legumes for me. Just take a taste," she said with a big grin on her face. I was sweating bullets with nervousness trying to gear up enough nerve to eat this mysterious food.

"Okay, I will try it, but I have to have a drink in front of me to wash it down with if I don't like it," I said. So they intensely watched me in anticipation that I would try it.

"Oh my God. I don't know about this," I said in fear. I looked it over for the longest time.

"Come on, don't be a wimp," my fiancée taunted me. I could see that twinkle in her eye that meant she was up to something ornery.

"Stop being high maintenance," she said. "Just try it. Look, I will even eat it with you."

So, she got her own plate of legumes and decided to try and coax me to eat it too.

"Just eat it," she said in a commanding tone. I did not want to mess with her, nor did I want to eat the legumes either, but this time, I was in a true pickle (Pardon the pun)!

So, I decided to put a piece of this green crap on my fork. Before, I got the courage to taste it I decided I would smell it. The stench was that of pickle juice. It was overpowering. So, I took off the green stuff, and put a bean on my fork instead.

"Will this appease you, Wissa?" I asked Carissa in baby talk as we often speak to each other this way.

"Yes, Wis," she replied. "Just try it and see if you like it."

Finally, I caved in and put the thing on my fork. I took a deep breath and decided to go through with it. I put it in my mouth and chewed it quickly. In the meantime, I looked as though I was doubled over and gagging immensely at the taste of this one bean. It was all her father could do from not laughing out loud. He said, "I wish Momma could have been home to witness this," speaking of his wife who was at work and who was also in on the joke of what Thai legumes really were.

After I swallowed the bean and took a drink of Capri Sun to wash it down with, I had to ask, "What was that sauce covered over it?"

"Oh, that was Miracle Whip," he said. Then, he and my fiancée started busting a gut. The look on my face was priceless as it showed an exaggeration of disgust. I had been duped into trying something new, much to my chagrin. The look on my face was an amalgamation of disgust, horror, and distrust. In other words, "The look on Kristopher's face was priceless," her dad said as he gloated over his feat.

Okay, so I am naïve. Not too daring, if you will. I can be prejudiced against certain foods, as I am for the most part set in my ways. However, when someone asks me to try something new that I find to be suspicious, I will do my best to try to get out of it one way or another for the fear of the unknown.

Chapter 22: Love Thy Brother

I remember writing a play for playwriting class while attending graduate school at Eastern Illinois University. The play was about a man who took an interest in Arab culture and persuaded his girlfriend to share the same interest despite prejudiced parents.

I was inspired by my professor to visit a mosque in Champaign to see how a real Islamic service was conducted. I was nervous that day, as I grew up a Christian, but I really wanted to expand my horizons and branch out to learn about other world religions. My interest in the Middle East grew after September 11, 2001. I hated reading that Arabs were treated poorly because of the actions of a select few, who used their hatred to destroy the Twin Towers. It was not their fault, they were not to blame, but I read of stories in which people were setting fires to mosques, and I felt bad for the Arabs – a group I feel is often misunderstood, such as myself.

As I made my way to Champaign, via Interstate 57, I checked myself in the mirror hoping that I wore the right clothing to the service. I had a copy of my English Qu'ran, and I was prepared to stick out sorely like a sore thumb. And it showed. Immediately, I walked into the service with my shoes on and a notebook in hand. Luckily, I caught on and went back outside to take my shoes off and set my notebook on the floor. I didn't mean to be disrespectful. I just didn't know any better; ignorance was my excuse.

I remember not knowing what to do, and I remember seeing two Turks eyeing me as I messed up some of the practices. They could tell I was new to the practice.

There I was praying to Allah. He is not my God, but he is the god of several people whom I respect and look up to. We faced east toward the holy city of Mecca and practiced several prayers in the form of bowing to the floor to show humbleness. I also remember the women dressed in their veils praying separate away from the men.

Afterward, the two Turks introduced themselves and they introduced me to the Imam, the religious leader in Islam ceremonies. I was introduced to several members of the church including people from Algeria, Uganda, Iraq, and Turkey. One guy – his name was Malik – was from Algeria, and he talked to me about Islam. In the end, he called me “a brother of God,” whether I chose to believe in Allah or not. These words were inspirational.

On the journey home, I remember sitting in dead silence, almost breaking out in tears as I prayed to my God that the world could form relationships like these with one another. Most often, Christian churches don’t always lay out a welcome mat for people, but that day I felt most welcomed by a group I was unfamiliar with, and they made me feel accepted.

Now, I aspire to go to their land and learn more about their ways in hopes of making more connections and friendships. I have made friends in Libya and Oman (two countries I hope to visit), and I have become so engrossed in learning about Arab culture that I have bought books on how to write and talk in Arabic, I collect Arabian coins, I listen to Arabian music, and I eat Arabian foods. I even try to speak Arabic when I meet someone from the Middle East. They have taught me so much, but most important, they have taught me to have compassion and understanding.

Chapter 23: Patience Friends

When I was in college, I lived in a house with some of my friends from church. I recall having this huge *One Day at a Time* kick. Yes, the 70's show that starred Valerie Bertinelli and that obnoxious maintenance man Dwayne Schneider. I had one of my roommates take me to the cable company so we could purchase a cable converter that would allow us to get more channels, including the Entertainment Channel (E!), which was carrying the show in reruns. I watched the show on a daily basis, and, sometimes, if I could, I would watch the same show in a repeat later on in the afternoon. My roommates hated the show and did not understand why I was so interested in it. My only response was that it was a show from my past that I used to watch and love. That was good enough for me.

Additionally, I agitated them by getting a new CD that featured theme songs of various television shows from the 70's and 80's. Of course, *One Day at a Time* was on the disc, and I set up my stereo to which it would constantly repeat this song of a night. This song was the last thing I heard at night and the first thing I woke up to in the morning, and this repetitive behavior lasted for months on end. It's funny that no one tried to steal the disc and dispose of it or even try to dispose of me for the constant torture. I am sure that I am the kind of person who could drive Osama bin Laden out of a cave just by playing a song over and over again.

At least that's the ideology my fiancée thinks of my craziness for certain things. I am a very passionate person to say the least, and whatever object I am obsessed on becomes the focus, or highlight, of my life. This became apparent to her when I was

driving down to her home in Greenup from my home in Tilton. The whole hour and a half in the car, I listened to Bob Seger's song "Still the Same" at least five or six different times back to back to back. She was annoyed with how I rewound the tape and cued it up to that song. Furthermore, she was aggravated because later the same day she got that song stuck in her head, much to her chagrin.

The same kind of behavior is coherent in candy bars too. For the longest time, I was on a Reese's kick. I had to buy all kinds of Reese's crap: Fast Break, Reese's Pieces, Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. If it had the Reese's name on it, chances were I would buy it. However, one day out of the blue, it transformed into a craving for Hershey's Fifth Avenue Bars. For the longest time, on a daily basis, I would go to the gas stations and buy up several Fifth Avenue bars until one day it changed to Snickers. Now, it seems I can't get off the Snickers kick. Yet what's funny about this whole scenario is I never know what I will crave next or for how long it will last. I do know that lately I have had a craving for Drake's Ring Dings. Does anybody know where they sell them though? All I know about them is they were heavily promoted on Seinfeld, and I feel like I am going crazy without them!

One time, I had a craving for Tab Cola. This is an old cola that was sold in stores for a limited time from the 60's on to the 80's. I called Coca Cola to see if they still made it since it went off the shelf in Illinois, and they told me they did, but some stores carried it and some did not. Then, one day, my family and I took a trip to Merrillville, Indiana, and I asked to stop at a Dominic's grocery store. I combed through the pop aisle and there it was. It was as if a ray of silver light were shining down on my most cherished prize. I was so happy, and I bought it in quantities. For the longest time, I drank the stuff like

water despite the fact that it pretty much tasted like flat Coke. I still like the stuff, but I am learning to drink it in moderation instead of collecting it as an object of my past. I say this because there are still several unopened Tab Cola cans sitting downstairs in our basement collecting dust with their age.

One other ritual I had when I worked as a newspaper reporter for the *Hoopeston Chronicle* in Hoopeston, Illinois, was I used to visit the Burger King on a daily basis. I would always order a plain double cheeseburger, fries, and a Coke. I became so predictable that the employees knew what I wanted just upon seeing my face upon entrance. Having employees know what I want is not a common ritual either. I have had similar experiences at Taco Bell, Blimpie, Sbarro's Pizza, and Wendy's too. Perhaps, I am too predictable, but I know what I like and that's what I stick with when I visit these places.

Reverting back to common rituals, I have always been an avid soap opera fan. I have watched *Days of Our Lives* ever since 1990 up until James E. Reilly wrote for the show. Then, I took a brief hiatus as I found DAYS slumping in its quality of writing. That's when I turned to SoapNet and started watching *All My Children*. How I quickly fell in love with Susan Lucci (Erica Kane), Eden Riegel (Bianca Montgomery), and Alexa Havins (Babe Carey-Chandler). Then, sometimes, I would watch *One Life to Live* afterward. Quickly, I caught on to all the characters, their backgrounds, and found myself rooting for them in their stories. However, after a brief interval from Days, I have gone back to the show. And it's almost as if I never left. With some new characters on the show, I have become readjusted to the characters I once watched every day, and I am growing fond of characters I didn't get a chance to see before, Steve and Kayla. I seem to

have regained knowledge of the show's history again (who is related to who, what each storyline is, and who is in on-and-off again romances). I was elated when I got to meet both Matthew Ashford (ex-Jack) and Melissa Reeves (ex-Jennifer) at a Salem Fest held in Salem, Illinois one year. I will never forget hugging Missy and shaking Matthew's hand.

Tuesdays and Wednesdays, I am pretty much devoted to *American Idol*. My whole family likes to watch who will advance to the finals to be held at the Kodak Theater in Hollywood. We all like to call in and vote for our favorites, provided they haven't been sent home for lack of votes. I really feel this show has helped me bond with my family, and I devote my nights to it unless something, such as class, takes me away from the weekly routine.

Friday nights are reserved for karaoke. I love to karaoke songs from the 80's. This is the type of music I generally stick to when I sing although I have been daring and have tried other genres out too. I have most fun with the 80's though. I love to get in front of a crowd and perform a song. When I sing, I imagine the room is empty; there is no one in the crowd for me to look at, otherwise, I am just sure I would have a fear to sing in front of a large crowd. Every Friday, I go to Gino's Place in Danville, and I have one or two Pepsi's and sing two or three songs. Sometimes, I am great and get ovations. Other times, I just want to slink away in shame at having sung so wretchedly. I remember singing "Africa" by the band Toto. I tried to sing it falsetto, and I was never more humiliated as to walk off the stage after it was done in shame over how it sounded.

Saturday nights, I usually watch back-to-back episodes of the show *Cops* followed by that hard-nosed fugitive tracker John Walsh and his show *America's Most*

Wanted. This always irritates my fiancée as she would much rather watch something else. Sometimes, throughout the day, I will get on the Internet and look up a list of the FBI's Top 10 Most Wanted fugitives as well as fugitives from the U.S. Marshalls Service; the Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms Agency; the Drug Enforcement Agency; the FBI Division fields; and Crimestoppers. As if I would ever really run into one of these people, but you never know?

Who knows when I will start a new kick, what it will be, or how long it lasts, but I will be obsessive about it when it arrives. I am very gung-ho about my obsessions, and I bring a certain enthusiasm not found in most people. I'm strange, I'm weird, I'm eccentric, I'm me!

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